

**cosmic punchline**

**Utopiste**

## cosmic punchline by Utopiste

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**Summary:**

"You're a white, male, thirty-year-old stand-up comedian wearing a T-shirt you found at Goodwill that calls your own dick a legend and you thought you got into the good place?" Eddie says incredulously.

Richie grimaces. "I don't know, I thought maybe they were just super lax about these things, how the fuck would I know, I've never died before!"

"You thought they were super lax about who got sent to hell or- oh my god," Eddie whispers, realization and horror dawning on him. "You're a moron."

"Well, *obviously we know that*, thanks."

(In which Richie is not supposed to be there, Bill doesn't understand what his two soulmates are so worried about, Stan is not, in fact, The Man, Mike's soulmates will be books, and hell may be other people

but it sure beats being miserable on your own.)

# 1. EVERYTHING IS FINE!

## Author's Note:

me: maybe i should take a break into my 30 days writing challenge i literally am moving to another country i won't have time to write much in the first month

also me: i'm obsessed with that fucking clown movie and if i don't write about it i will literally die

Richie wakes up to a wall of bricks so red they look straight out of a television set decor and a bright neon sign that spells out in all caps that *EVERYTHING IS FINE*. It takes a few seconds of staring at the lights in a daze before Richie remembers the last few hours-

(it comes in a rush of sensations: green lights reflected on mated brown fur, that fucking new kids on the block song on the stereo, sunshine glittering on the asphalt, hands shaking on the cold leather of the steering wheel, gas station stops, chainsmoking cigarettes in front of the no-smoking sign, didn't you quit last month, and the month before that- a doe standing in the middle of the road, *derry welcomes you home* in chipped paint, big dark eyes glinting in the headlights, oh that's where the saying is from, night setting on the road, only a few more hours and you're here, come on rich, sleep is for the weak, a doe standing in the middle of the road with delicate legs trembling on the asphalt, hands shaking on the cold leather of the steering wheel-)

*(he died. holy shit he really died and he can still feel shards of glass digging all over his body and seatbelt like steel-)*

Richie remembers the last few hours of his life and the irony of the situation hits him.

*EVERYTHING IS FINE*, neon says, and he laughs so hard he cries. Huge, loud sobs until a man in an impeccable white costume opens the door on his right and peers at him curiously, eyes glinting amber with the neon light.

“So, I’m guessing you’re Richie Tozier, then?” he says, and when he smiles, a good-natured grin that makes Richie feel like a kid at the fair again, he shows all of his teeth. “I’m the architect. Please come in.”

Although he would love to feel special, Richie realizes quickly he is not the first one to arrive by a long mile when the angel-demon-*something* (he wasn’t entirely listening to his speech, to be honest) asks Ben to help Richie ease into his new surroundings. Ben, as it turns out, is five feet twelve of man-candy. He also has good manners, an easy, warm smile, and apparently a shiny new rank of vice-architect, whatever the *fuck* that means. He even has a little badge on the pocket of his shirt that glints in the sunshine to say so.

Ben Hanscom. The name sounds familiar in a dim, distant way, one that would make Richie ask if he gave just a little bit more of a shit. Instead, he pesters him with dumb questions about why in hell they chose *froyo* of all things when everyone knows it’s just cheap watered-down ice cream, why this neighborhood has not one but three libraries (apparently every good place is based on its inhabitants and all of his neighbors are humongous nerds), and how the hell Ben is so *jacked*.

“Oh, thanks, I workout,” Ben says, bashful. “And I eat my vegetables, I guess.”

“I workout too,” Richie says, which is a lie. “Man, you gotta tell me what David Beckham bullshit training regimen you’re on.”

“Uh, well,” Ben starts. “I started running when I was a teenager, so I’m still used to, what, thirteen miles a week-”

“Wait wait wait,” Richie interrupts. “How come we still have to exercise? We’re in heaven. Can’t we just ask tiny chubby angels to copy-paste abs on ourselves? Oh my god can you imagine, I’m getting, like, Ryan Gosling’s body copied, up until here,” Richie makes a slashing motion to his neck, “up to my face. Wait, shirt, scratch that, I’m definitely getting Ryan Gosling’s face too. I’m getting everything changed, baby. The new and improved

Trashmouth Tozier. Except for my d- hey, man, are you alright?”

“Oh, yes, sure,” Ben says, but he has a weird, distant look on his face. “Don’t worry about me.”

So Richie doesn’t. Ben rubs the nape of his neck and carries himself around the good place in a way that’s almost self-conscious, which makes no sense considering he is not only a snack but the entire damn lunch. He still shows him around the gym (*SUBSCRIPTION FEES: ZERO DOLLARS PER MONTH, YOU’RE DEAD!*) , though . This time Richie keeps to himself when he thinks that his notion of heaven does very much not include regular workouts. But then again, as the suspicion creeps up on him, that neighborhood wasn’t really designed for *him*, was it?

His quote-unquote house is filled with clown paintings and memorabilia even though Richie has been terrified of clowns ever since he was three and he saw Ronald McDonald scream a slur at some guys across the mall. Both he and Ben have to bend their heads and crouch a little to step into a crowded living room filled with old furniture that wouldn’t be out of place in a hoarder’s house as they prepare for the apocalypse. It makes Richie claustrophobic just standing here. The Pomeranian dog japing at him, though, is actually pretty cute.

For a second, Richie lets himself entertain the thought that maybe afterlife won’t be so bad, and then the Pomeranian pees all over the musty grandma flowery carpet.

Richie swears and throws cushions at him while Ben hurriedly asks for what looks like the physical embodiment of an omniscient Alexa to give him a broom and wipe this out.

“Siri, please get this demon dog away from me,” Richie yells at the random guy who popped up in the middle of the living room.

“Siri is not my name,” the man informs him. “I’m Stan. Short for-”

“I don’t forking care, Stan,” Richie yelps “take the forker out-”

The man looks down under curly hair at the dog, sitting prettily on the side of the carpet that's not ruined, tail wagging and tongue lolling out in a canine smile, then back up at Richie, whose pant leg is dripping in pee, and back at the dog, now laying down, begging for pets.

"This is the," he says, articulating every single word way too pointedly, "*demon dog?*"

"Hey, it was way more demonic a few minutes ago when there was a glitch in the matrix and it turned into a forking rat monster- wait, why the fork can't I swear?"

Stan pauses. Somehow, despite his neutral face, his silence weighs like judgment. "Swearing was automatically disabled for all citizens." He purses his lips ever-so-slightly, "Would you like to have swearing enabled again?"

"Bloody hell, bet your bum I would, my mate," Richie says in his old English captain facing his long-lost nemesis but also drunk off his tits voice, before frowning. "Hey, how come swearing in British is allowed? Does God just hate America? What am I talking about, we get three hurricanes a year, of course he does."

"I'm not sure," Stan says assuredly, "that the system recognized your sentence as *any* language."

"Wow. Alexa, are you throwing shade at me?" Richie asks, before turning to Ben: "He is, isn't he?"

"Yeah, actually, I didn't know you could do that, Stan."

"I can't," Stan says, and then positively *beams* at Ben.

Figures even robots would swoon. Ben is all that. Not even in a way that makes Richie attracted to him, really - more in that cardboard poster way that makes him immediately tuck his gut in and try to walk straighter and generally feel awful about himself. Heaven sure involves a lot of impostor syndrome so far, and Richie has to admit he isn't a big fan.

Then again, why would he? It's not like it's *his* heaven to enjoy. It's a

place filled with creepy clown paintings and creepy clown statues and memories he can watch on a flat screen from a life that isn't even his.

Realizing this is all in fact some huge, cosmic joke he's the butt of doesn't even scare Richie off - or rather not more so than he already was anyway, which is very fucking much, constant chewing on his lower lip, legs jiggling with anxiety every time he sits down - as much as it confirms everything else he already knew about himself and this fucking place.

But hey, at least he can swear now.

When Ben introduces his soulmate to him, his first reaction is a moment of blind, unadulterated panic and he thinks about making a joke or a run for it and then he realizes he's already dead and there's nowhere else for him to run to. After spending all of his life running from one big gay freakout into another, Richie doesn't know how to deal with any of *this*. As foreign and new and terrifying as the entire place is weirdly homely.

"Nice to meet you," the man smiles, and it makes his eyes crinkle too. "I'm your soulmate."

Then again, he remembers bitterly: probably not even *his* soulmate to have.

"Of course," Ben says timidly, "the system is not just one size fits all. Some people have platonic soulmates. Some people," and is Richie imagining it or is Ben's expression darkening slightly, once again, "have more than one. But this is the person you were made for, the person you have been waiting for all of your life. Eddie Kaspbrak, meet Richie Tozier."

There is an awkward beat, and before the guy in front of him - cute but not in that glaringly obvious handsome way Ben is, doe eyes, kind of small, not necessarily Richie's type but easy enough on the eyes that he couldn't complain - can say anything more, Richie claps his hands together and says: "Wow, you been watching chick flicks



much, Benny boy? Didn't know you had a romantic soul under all that raw muscle and sex appeal." And then, because he's a fucking idiot: "And here I was expecting a *When Harry met Sally* moment, but howdy, this is more *Brokeback Mountain*, isn't it, pal?"

The thing is, Richie knows when his rambling goes from not having a filter to being an asshole. He can feel it happen from outside his body, peering in like the conductor who lost control of the machinery in a dramatic trainwreck, not actually trying to stop anything. Still, even as he expects it, the way the man's face falls and recomposes itself into an angry frown makes his stomach drop somewhere under his guts in guilt.

"What the actual *fork* is wrong with you?" the guy says. "Wait, why the fork can't I swear?"

And this, in fact, is how Richie falls a little bit in love with Eddie Kaspbrak.

"Aw, maybe we really are soulmates," he says, because he has no brain-to-mouth filter.

"I don't think so. Hey, Stan—"

"Who's Stan?" Richie says, then gasps. "Are you already cheating on me? After I was in a car accident two hours ago? That's *rough*, buddy."

"I'm Stan," the curly-haired robot from earlier says as he pops up right behind Richie's ear, making him startle in fright, and the fucker totally did it on purpose.

"There was a mistake in your soulmate system whatever thingie," Eddie informs him with a victorious look at Richie, hands still raised and mouth still gaping from the guy's sudden appearance. "He's not my soulmate."

Stan tilts his head a little. "Sorry to tell you this, but Richie Tozier is definitely the man who was assigned with you. I wish I could help you more."

"*Rude*," Richie says.

“These are just automatic politeness measures,” Ben tells him soothingly. “Don’t take it personally.”

The effect is sort of subdued by Stan hiding his smile behind his hand.

“Are you sure?” Eddie insists, and Richie turns to him to make a joke about how desperate he sounds, but it dies in his throat at the genuinely dismayed look on Eddie’s face.

Honestly, he gets it. He wouldn’t want himself as a soulmate either.

For a second he entertains the thought of saying something nicer to Eddie, softer, smoothing that harsh line between his eyebrows, though it is better, maybe, to disappoint him now, so it doesn’t come as such a shock to discover Richie isn’t his actual soulmate. *Ha!* As if there ever was any doubt that a stand up comedian in a dirty plaid shirt over a thrift shop T-shirt with one arrow pointing at his face to spell out *the man* and another at his crotch to note *the legend* would be anyone’s soulmate, let alone a successful risk analyst with cheeks that beg to be pinched and eyes like a fucking Shakespeare sonnet.

(Richie wishes he could tell him what he just learned, that this is all a cosmic joke and that both of them are the punchline, but it is of bad taste to spoil your own show.)

## 2. i want a forking soulmate refund

### Summary for the Chapter:

“So anyway, the thing is,” Richie concludes after a good fifteen minutes of rambling and not looking at him. “I’m not actually supposed to be here.”

They are on the bed, a foot away from each other, facing the clown paintings. It says a lot about Eddie’s life (or lack thereof) that looking at a portrait straight out of a haunted house tour is better than confronting the face of the guy he will share the bed of for the rest of his not-life.

Oh, is that going to be awkward now.

### Notes for the Chapter:

in which some plot is started, and quickly interrupted by The Shenanigans

also i wrote it, beta extraordinaire gabi reviewed it and then i rewrote like half of it so if anything seems wrong i'm jared, nineteen, and if you tell me i'll correct it and stuff

“So anyway, the SparkNotes version is,” Richie concludes after a good fifteen minutes of rambling and not looking anywhere near Eddie. “I’m not actually supposed to be here. As in, not together in this room. *Here* here. In the good place. As in-”

”Yes, Richie, I got it,” Eddie snaps, then falls silent again.

Eddie, whose entire world fell apart a few hours ago before being patched together in Ben Hanscom's kind hands and kinder words. Eddie who watches it unravel again, not brick by brick, but entirely overturned and scrambled like an overflowed dike.

A few hours' time now seems like a few lifetimes (*ha! Good one, Eddie*) lifetimes ago, ever since Eddie opened his eyes to an

insultingly bright neon sign (and didn't they know how bad it was for your cornea?) already halfway into an asthma attack, ready to shout at whoever was responsible-

They told him he died, but they didn't tell him how. They assumed his little human mind couldn't take it, as if Eddie hasn't been thinking of ways he could die crossing the street or having an asthma attack or catching malaria in an unwashed airport seat every single day for his entire life.

And now it has happened. Eddie truly is dead. He doesn't know what to be scared of anymore.

"Are you going to say anything," Richie asks, "or just sit here and let me fill the silence by freaking out? Because I'm totally fine with it, you know, I'm pretty fucking good at filling awkward silences, Trashmouth Tozier, that's my street name-"

"Oh my god, just *shut up*," Eddie snaps.

They are on the bed, a foot away from each other, facing a clown painting. It says a lot about Eddie's life (or lack thereof) that looking at a portrait straight out of a haunted house tour is better than confronting the face of the guy he will share the bed of *for the rest of his not-life*. Oh, is *that* going to be awkward now.

If he closes his eyes, he doesn't have to choose between looking at a smiling clown or the *asshole* on his left. A weight like guilt immediately settles in his stomach at that, because to his surprise, Richie actually *does* shut up. Eddie was not expecting this sort of quiet niceness from him, and for some reason, that, out of everything, throws him into the frenzied loop of dreadful thoughts that were already simmering under the surface of his mind, the first of many being, of course, *what the fuck?*

He knows why this is the straw on the metaphorical camel's back. It would all be so much easier if he could just decide Richie is a terrible person who doesn't deserve to be here and snitch on him without a second thought. A flash of anger briefly burns through his chest, because at least Richie could have the decency to be a jerk through and through, but even Eddie realizes that this isn't fair. He can't

bring himself to quite stay mad at Richie but he can't bring himself to stop spiraling into complete and utter panic either.

His fingers itch for the inhaler he doesn't need, because he is dead. He is *dead*, (D-E-A-D), and for a few blissful hours he thought maybe that meant he wouldn't have to be scared, period- maybe he would be *FINE*, as the neon screamed- but it seems, just like his soul, anxiety is immortal. Before he can stop himself, a sound that should have been a chuckle but is not unlike the whining of a dog about to be put down escapes his lips. The irony. If he could have thought of anything scarier than death, hiding someone from the godlike figures responsible for sending his soul to the good place or the ominously called *bad place* in his bedroom would have been a strong contender. He is already guilty just by knowing Richie is here. Guilt by association. He's an accessory to a crime against the afterlife now. Fuck. *He's aiding and abetting a crime against God.*

There are not enough swear words for Eddie to express how terrified he is right now, and he can't even say any of them.

"Fork," Eddie repeats nonsensically, propping his legs on the bed to rest his brow against his knees. "Forking shirt."

Richie snorts. "Yeah, it's a goddamn bitch of an unsatisfactory situation, all right."

"If you don't shut up about the Brokeback Mountain references I will punch you in the throat."

He can feel Richie move next to him on the mattress but he doesn't look at the face he is no doubt pulling. It doesn't matter, though: they have remained sitting in silence for less than a minute and if Richie doesn't stop jiggling his leg like a kid with Adderall withdrawal, Eddie might have to act on his threats. Can you kill someone if you're both already dead? Will the guy just respawn next to him like Stan does, popping out of thin air like a filthy Goodwill-clothes-wearing nightmare in the middle of their filthy survivalist house that looks a disturbing lot like the place Eddie used to live in with his mom? The mere idea makes Eddie's lungs constrict with anxiety, and before he can stop himself his hand is reaching for the inhaler in his fanny pack.

“Uh,” Richie says. “Are you alright, dude? Wait, do you still have asthma in heaven? Is this like, a thing?”

“It’s not forking heaven,” Eddie corrects, “it’s *the good place*. Didn’t they give you the speech?”

“Oh! Yeah.” Beat. “I didn’t listen.”

Eddie turns around, inhaler still in mouth, to Richie’s shrugging shoulders and unrepentant expression. “You died and went to heaven and when God started talking to you you just *didn’t listen*?”

“Uh, thought you just said this wasn’t heaven? You’re contradicting yourself a little here, Eddiebear.”

“Excuse me, *how* is that what you get from what I just said?”

Richie shrugs again. “I mean, at least I was listening to what you just said. As a soulmate, I feel like that’s pretty fucking sexy of me if I dare say so.”

Eddie watches him with repulsion and lets the inhaler drop back onto his lap. “Did dying lower your relationship standards or did your partners get used to bashing their head against the wall?”

“I mean, dating me always did involve a fair amount of bashing against a wall-”

“Oh my god,” Eddie says, shellshocked.

“What, you asked!”

“Oh my god.” Eddie pushes his palms against his eyelids, “I want a forking soulmate refund.” There is a beat as Eddie lies down on the bed even as his brain, who doesn’t stop at silly things like death, protests about strangers’ sheets and dust mites. He ignores it. “Wait, why can’t I swear when *you* can?”

“What, that’s not how you always talk? I just thought you were that cute,” Richie says and chuckles at his own bad joke when he lies down on his back next to Eddie.

Their shoulders brush, Richie impossibly warm against him, a human furnace. Eddie thinks distantly of always getting cold as soon as the winter breeze started to blowback on Earth and surrounding himself on layer upon layer of coats and scarves, freezing. Still he inches a little further, out of pure spite.

He turns his face, cheek against the soft mellowness of the bedsheets, to find Richie already staring at him with an uncertain grimace, lidded eyes even then blown impossibly wide by his hipster glasses.

“I forking hate you,” Eddie groans. “I want another soulmate.”

Next to him, warm shoulders still.

“Well. About that.”

Hindsight being twenty-twenty, Eddie will, later, pinpoint that warmth seeping into his body and that *well, about that* as the moment his afterlife experience turned from a disaster into a hellscape.

“Please tell me you’re not telling Ben about everything I just told you, in confidence, because I respect you as a person,” Richie says, standing up against the door, tall frame filling up the entire space and keeping Eddie from storming out the way he oh-so-desperately wants to.

Eddie is definitely going to tell Ben everything Richie told him, in confidence, because he couldn’t keep his idiot mouth from running, but he debates admitting that to Richie or not. On the one hand, not giving him a forewarning seems like a jerk move. On the other hand, Richie will almost definitely try to dissuade him.

Then again, what is he going to do? Murder him? It’s a little late for *that*.

“Listen, you seem very nice- well, actually, you don’t, but that’s not the point-” Eddie starts.

“Wow. Your bedroom talk really needs work, uh?”

"Fork you," Eddie bites before he takes a calming, centering breath. "That's exactly the point. You're a terrible person."

"Well, I wouldn't say terrible," Richie corrects, and he almost seems contemplative. "I mean sure, they can't all be winners, but I didn't, like, murder kittens, or pressure a date into sex, or fuck your mom."

"God, is everything a joke to you?" Eddie says. He's sitting up, grasping at the bedsheets in frustration, and Richie, who has been pacing in front of him in the limited space of their (*their*) bedroom for the better part of ten minutes, stops to stare at Eddie, looking every bit like a deer in headlights.

"I'm sorry, alright!" Richie shouts, throwing his arms in the air. "I make jokes when I'm anxious. I'm a stand-up comedian. It's what I do."

"You're a white, male, thirty-year-old stand-up comedian wearing a T-shirt that calls your own dick a legend and you thought you got into the good place?"

Richie grimaces. "I don't know, I thought maybe they were just super lax about these things, how the fuck would I know, I've never died before!"

"You thought they were super lax about who got sent to hell or- oh my god," Eddie whispers, realization and horror dawning on him. "You're a moron."

"Well, *obviously we know that*, thanks."

For a terrible moment, there is only silence, Richie leaning against the door with his arms crossed, fingers fidgeting on his biceps, tapping staccato rhythms, looking anywhere but at Eddie as the latter gawks at him. Worst is, with his tall stature, mussed dark hair and not-too-bad-looking face, Richie had almost been attractive to Eddie when he first saw him. He thought something in the line of the kissing part of being soulmates at least not being too much of a chore once he persuaded the guy to brush his teeth for two to three minutes with fluoride toothpaste and maybe even to floss. He was *glad*.



How fucking ironic.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” Eddie says, and Richie suddenly turns towards him so that it’s Eddie’s turn to look away, eye contact seeming too intimate right now, too vulnerable. “That my soulmate is just out there somewhere, being replaced by a random guy in a plaid shirt, or that you’re actually my soulmate, and you’re just,” he pauses, wonder if it’s too harsh for a fleeting moment, decides it doesn’t matter if he hurts Richie’s feelings anyway: “a terrible person.”

Richie chuckles, but it’s a humorless, sad sound. Eddie doesn’t want to look back at him, not when this sad, humorless brokenness will be on his face too, airing out in the open, just two men, their clown painting and half a dozen family photos of people Eddie never wants to see again and he has a feeling Richie doesn’t want to see either hung up on the wallpaper like they used to be back in his mother’s living room. The architect probably thought the similarity to Eddie’s old place would be a familiar reassurance, and maybe it was at first: now it is everything but, space cramped and claustrophobic. Eddie needs to tell Ben about this. Eddie needs to tell Ben about everything.

Every bit of this situation is worse than the last, and it is all messed up and scrambled like a soap opera on a television screen whose reception is failing its owners. Nothing about this is *fine*. Eddie doesn’t know where they go from here.

The wet, popping sound of Richie opening his mouth makes Eddie startle back into reality, eager to know what his not-soulmate is going to say as if anything could pull them out of this mess.

Stan appears in the middle of their bedroom.

“Hi, I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” he says, loudly, with both his eyes shut.

“Oh, yes, that’s the sound Eddie and I make when we’re having hot, sweaty lovemaking going on,” Richie says. “Complete silence.”

“Actually, that sounds about right,” Eddie says, startling a laugh out

of Richie and a not-quite-smile from Stan.

“Hey, Eddie gets off a good one!”

“I’m not getting off anything, you asshole-”

“Richie’s phrase is supposed to mean that you pulled off a good joke,” Stan says to Eddie, before adding, features still ever-so-neutral: “he’s not actually suggesting that you *would* be getting off with him.”

Eddie whistles. “You heard that, Richie?”

“I didn’t. Hey, Stan the Man-”

“Not a man.”

“-did you have anything to tell us, or did you just hope to walk in on us like the creepy pervert you are? Because I gotta say, robots are not my usual type-”

“Not a robot, either,” Stan says, and Eddie could swear he saw him rolling his eyes, but it has disappeared before he can blink, a trick of the eye more than anything else. “I wanted to remind you that you are invited to come over to the vice architect house down the street for a neighborhood welcome party. It starts in,” Stan pauses and looks at his bare wrist as if he was checking the time, “five minutes ago.”

“Ugh, do we have to go?” Eddie says at the same time as Richie asks: “Will there be booze?”

But Stan has already left their house just as suddenly as he appeared, and there is nothing between Eddie and Richie but a lot of empty space and a lot of empty words to put off until there is nothing else to do but argue about it once again.

“Come on, doll,” Richie says in a weird Southern belle drawl. “A party will cheer you right up!”

“If I go, do you promise you won’t make any stupid forking voice?”

“Sticks and stones may break my bones,” Richie starts before he

pauses. "Wait. That's not it."

"Great! This is going to be a disaster," Eddie says, but internally he is sighing in acceptance. Sure, this is going to be a disaster. What's new?

Not even twenty minutes into the party, Richie is making stupid fucking voices.

*He* says it's payback for Eddie exposing all the risks they are taking going to Ben's place when Richie is a literal criminal during their walk. Eddie says Richie is just the absolute worst person he's ever met and goes to get a drink after he makes Richie promise not to draw any attention to himself, for once.

On the upside, the place is beautiful, all high ceilings, golden light, bay windows, modern chandeliers, and sleek surfaces, marble twirling in ways it shouldn't be able to, an architect's wet dream if Eddie has ever seen one. When he opened the door for them, Ben explained with a sheepish grin that he helped Stan and the architect with the original design, and then let them make it a little more, well, heavenly. Watching the ways reality's rules are bent sideways is disturbingly beautiful, like bad special effects snuck in their reality and became bigger than life. Eddie finds his fingers itching for his inhaler as he tells Richie to wait for him by the buffet while he calls to Stan.

"Yes?" Stan says wearily when he pops up in front of Eddie, inexplicably changed into a colorful bird shirt and slacks instead of his usual blue striped shirt.

In the single day since Eddie has arrived, he has single-handedly caused Stan to appear about a dozen times to check on various issues that range from asking where to get medicine (from Stan himself, on what he called *the off chance that you would catch pharyngitis while your body is being cremated*) to whether that flying activity would involve any harness or form of safety (*you're dead, Eddie, you do get that, right*) and if his frozen yogurt was both gluten-free and dairy-free (Stan had just sighed for a very, very long time. Eddie had

dropped it).

Needless to say, Stan is not a fan.

“Is this entire architecture very safe? I mean, I’m not really seeing any load-bearing wall here,” Eddie says, waving at his right, “or anywhere, for that matter. Not that I’m doubting your work or anything, I’m just, you know, saying.”

Stan stares at him for a few seconds too long before he smiles politely: “Actually, I would love to help you, but this is my night off.”

“Uh,” Eddie starts, “aren’t you like, an omniscient being-”

“Goodnight, Eddie,” Stan says sharply and disappears, leaving Eddie talking to an empty space of air when he used to stand.

Eddie gapes at it for a moment before he looks further to the back of the room. “I can still see you, you know!” he shouts.

Stan stares harder at the chocolate fountain in front of him as if he was having a very fascinating conversation with it. For all Eddie knows, they might. He considers going over there to harass him, ask him to switch his swearing button on maybe, and for a second he keeps watching the way wine swirls slowly in the glass Stan holds, but before he makes up his mind, he hears a loud *thud* behind him.

“Oh, wow, I think that guy is trying to stick his arm in the shrimp vending machine,” a stranger next to him, all rugged handsomeness and short-cropped hair, says with fascination.

“Oh my god, what an idiot,” Eddie says, and even while turning, he is praying to weird white-suit wearing gods that it is not *his* idiot.

Of course, weird white-suit wearing gods obviously don’t care about him, or they would not have matched him with a moron who tries to stick his arms up shrimp vending machines.

“I’m Mike Hanlon,” the man says, holding out his hand. “I arrived today. Ex librarian in Maine, currently librarian for the neighborhood, apparently.”

Eddie hesitates just a second before he shakes it because he doesn't know where to wash his hands afterward, but ultimately decides he has antibacterial gel in his fanny pack anyway, next to the inhaler. Mike's hand is calloused but soft in the way of men who worked hard but still knew what moisturizer is, even as they bought the cheap kind one gets near the supermarket checkout. He smells good, like old spice and cologne.

He's everything Richie Tozier is *not*.

For a second, Eddie despairs that he didn't get this nice, charming, normal, moisturizing man assigned as a soulmate rather than a plaid-wearing comedian *who doesn't even belong here* and has never had a real job in his life. Mike's soulmate is probably another charming, normal person who spent their lives saving kittens from trees or whatever.

"Eddie Kaspbrak," he says anyway. "Nice to meet you. I used to be a risk analyst and I'm not quite sure yet what I'm supposed to be here. Maybe I'm here to keep, uh, everyone from getting in trouble?" he tries, swapping Richie's name out of the sentence at the last moment.

Mike chuckles. "That sounds about right. Avoiding disasters would get you into the good place, I guess."

"Ugh, I hope there aren't any more of those lying around here, or else the afterlife is a scam," Eddie complains, only half-joking.

"It's still so weird to be here. I mean, I read so much about it-philosophy books, theology books, religious texts, you have to know a bit of everything to be, you know," Mike shrugs, "able to advise desperate high schoolers whose deadline is at midnight. And now here we are. The end of everything."

Eddie is about to answer with something normal and light and funny - or at least as normal as Eddie can croak out when going through a five hours long panic attack - before he has an idea.

If he dares say so himself, it's a fucking brilliant idea.

"Alright, stay right here- wait, no," Eddie stops himself. "Can we

meet again tomorrow? At that vegan milkshake place in the town center? Like, two in the afternoon?” Mike nods, smiling but confused, but before he can ask Eddie keep going: “Now, I would really love nothing more than to stay here and chat with you, but, you know-

“Risks to analyze,” Mike says dryly.

“I was going to say idiots to rescue from vending machines, but yeah.”

Eddie walks away to the bubbling sound of Mike’s rough, startled laugh and his hope that they’ll talk again, towards a mop of messy black hair and a pout under heavy glasses the side of dinner plates. He is fuming all the while, of course, because they had literally just agreed not to get noticed, and also Richie is an asshole.

Eddie comes up next to him, crouches a little, ashamed that people will see he associates with that guy, and he whisper-shouts something that he is sure will come up a great many times in their time together: “What the *fork*, exactly, do you think you’re doing?”

“Oh, hey, Eds,” Richie says, smiling up at him with a lax, boozy smile. “Fancy seeing a nice boy like you in a- uh, wait.”

“Are you *drunk*?”

Richie pauses. Then, uncertain: “No?”

Eddie sighs. Closes his eyes. Pinches the bridge of his nose. Debates letting Richie to his own device. Realizes Richie will not survive a week without getting caught and Eddie still has no idea whether he actually is his soulmate. Opens his eyes again to Richie gently but unsuccessfully tugging his arm out of the machine.

And then, again, with sentiment: “What the *fork* do you think you’re doing?”

## Notes for the Chapter:

thank you so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter or sent me a message on tumblr  
aaaaah you all literally made my week!!! I Am Full

Of Love

### 3. h is for Handsome Hanscom

#### Summary for the Chapter:

“What’s the name of these people who are like furries, but for robots?”

#### Notes for the Chapter:

in which robot furries are debated, ben definitely has a dark secret, scooby doo references are made and pining never stops.

The architect had smiled knowingly when he told Ben he would never have to be lonely again, and for a few moments, Ben had believed him. By now even Ben has figured out that this was a blatant lie, because even now in a room filled with people admiring his most perfect design, he feels every bit as unmoored as he always was back in life.

Back in a corner of the room Bill and Bev are standing against the wall and whispering, Bill leaning on the counter table towards her, her with one elbow on the counter and a laugh on her lips, not leaning away.

At least, he thinks bitterly, he used to be *used* to the loneliness. It was all he had ever known. To never have something was better than seeing it dangled in front of his eyes, so close he could almost taste it, always far enough that he had to reach further for it. Bev was going to choose Bill, of course. Why wouldn’t she? Bill was charismatic, and handsome in that effortless way Ben could never quite pull off, and oh-so-charming, with his stories and his crooked smile and his bright blue eyes. Ben was never even in the run.

(The architect had started by telling him he had not one but *two* soulmate matches, and for a minute Ben was thrown but thrilled. Maybe this was where he’d belong, he had thought, what he’d been yearning for all along. Then his face switched into a compassionate expression, leaning forwards on his elbows on his great white wooden desk, and he told Ben about the system getting confused



sometimes, and even without him saying it Ben had understood, somewhere deep within him, that they were maybe not his soulmates to have, or, worse even, that maybe they were and he wasn't *theirs*, not really, not at all.

Then he met Beverly Marsh in all her fire-kissed hair and sun-kissed freckles, and he knew.)

"Why the long face, Handsome Hanscom?" A voice echoes behind him, and before he can turn around, a gangly, warm arm is around his shoulder. "Ooh, Handsome Hanscom. Fun. Rhymes and puns and allo-alli-illiteration."

"*Alliterations*, Richie," an exasperated Eddie huffs, even though Ben heard him referring to placebos as gazebos barely a few hours ago before catching up on his mistake. "It's an alliteration. Illiterate is what you are."

When Ben angles his face to the right, he's nose to cheek with bourbon breath and dark stubble. "Richie, you smell like you had four drinks too many, at least," Ben says, but he's amused enough to be pulled off of his gloom.

He doesn't understand how a clean and proper guy like Eddie, with his perfectly ironed shirt and fitting jeans, ended up being matched with a man whose nickname is literally Trashmouth and hasn't even bothered changing out of the outfit he wore on the day of his death to come to the welcome party. But really, it is not like Ben understands anything about the mess that are soulmates anyway. Although he wishes he could help, he feels like the most he can do is give them time together alone to figure it out. So far, Eddie has spent the entire evening trailing after Richie like a worried duckling following a very inebriated, inappropriate duck, so what does Ben know, they may even be perfectly matched.

"On the contrary, my friend! You smell like you're four drinks too little. And also like manliness and sandalwood." Richie sniffs. "Seriously, man, what's your cologne even?"

Or maybe Richie just flirts with anyone who crosses his path.

"I am *right there*," Eddie whines.

"Oh, shit, you're right, sweetheart," Richie says and slightly uncoils himself further from Ben's side, warmth slipping away. "Come on, come smell him."

"I'm not smelling Ben, Richie."

"Come on! I *swear* he smells like Chris Evans."

"That's not the issue here, dipshirt."

"Wait," Ben muses, "how do you even know what Chris Evans smells like?"

Richie snorts. "Obviously I don't, Benny, I was talking about what Chris Evans *symbolically* smells like. On a metaphorical level. I'm a poet."

"You're a creep, is what you are," Eddie says.

"Spent a lot of time thinking about what Chris Evans would smell like, uh?" Ben asks.

"Come on, who doesn't? I spent the exact average amount of time a man should spend thinking about what Chris Evans smells like."

"That's not true," says Stan, who Ben invited to the party and unexpectedly showed up after he offered Ben a polite but firm dismissal, looking handsome in a colored bird shirt and slacks. "You spent exactly 27% more time thinking about Chris Evans than the average man."

He sips a cup of wine and doesn't smile under perfectly styled curly hair and Ben wonders for a second where the wine goes when Stan ingests it but knows better than to ask. He does meet Eddie's eye, though, and watches him mouth the exact same question as he himself shrugs.

"Stan the Man!" Richie shouts even though there are only a few feet between them. "Fancy seeing you here!"

“Still not a man,” Stan says.

“Look at you all dressed up,” Richie says, smiling and ignoring Stan’s protest as he drunkenly steps towards him and tries to twirl him. Stan doesn’t comply and remains stone-faced. “You’re the prettiest robot in this part of town, that’s for sure.”

“Still not a robot either,” Stan sighs.

“Hey, what’s the name of these people who are like furies, but for robots?”

“Robosexual?” Ben tries and immediately grimaces apologetically at Stan.

“That was disturbingly fast,” Eddie says.

Richie gasps dramatically. “I knew a man as handsome and rich and charming and smart as you had to have a dark secret kink! Thank you, Eddiekins.”

“What? This is so not what I meant!”

“We’re such a beautiful couple of detectives,” Richie sighs dreamily, batting his eyelashes, his hand still holding Stan’s up. “Like Sherlock and Watson before us. Bonnie and Clyde. Shaggy and Scooby.”

“Ew,” Eddie says. “So you’re the furry? Is that how you’re doing your furry coming out to me? By Scooby-Doo reference?”

“Can I just circle back and say *I don’t want to have sex with robots*,” Ben says, way too loudly, but he’s laughing, and Richie is too, even as Eddie gesticulates around him.

“That’s good to know,” Bev says behind him.

Ben freezes.

He turns around to her and Bill, her letting go of Bill’s arm as they get close, Bill smiling along with her. With her creamy white dress with the frills and the lace neckline, the one she showed him designs for a few days ago, and her hair curling freely around her shoulders,

she looks beautiful tonight - they both do, really. Bill's white shirt isn't the exact same shade of off-white as hers, but it is close, and they just belong together, as if they stepped out of the same picturebook. A flicker of jealousy sparks inside Ben's ribcage but before he can even pinpoint which part of his chest hurts Bill is leaning towards him to clap his shoulder goodheartedly, and Ben really couldn't hate him, no matter how complicated their situation got, specifically because of how easy it was to feel at home with Bill.

Beverly too walks up to him and puts her hand on his elbow, squeezing softly before she lets go and asks him to introduce her to his friends. He doesn't have enough space in his mind to both think about Bev, smiling up at him with laughter in her voice, and notice, even absently, that this is the first time anyone has asked that of him. He doesn't even have time to question it - are he, Richie, Eddie and Stan friends? - before he has to present everyone and accept Richie's interruptions when he does so.

Some part of him runs his mouth, a logical, life-saving part that he is grateful for, when it seems most of him is lit up, bubbling warmth coursing through his body along with something else, a feeling he had learned in the past week to associate with Beverly, and that he can only think about as of being on fire. He can actually feel the blood rushing to his cheeks whenever she inches closer while sighing with Eddie or coaxing a smile out of Stan or rolling her eyes at Richie, while Bill is busy charming everyone's pants off.

If being around Beverly is like burning, being around Bill is laying on the grass on a hot summer day, basking in the sun. It is just the way Bill is. Even now, he can feel everyone shifting somewhat towards him as he talks, including drunk-as-a-skunk Richie, frowning Eddie, and Stan, who is supposed to be above trivialities such as charisma.

"Earth to Ben," Bev says softly in his ear, breath hot and dry against his skin. He whips around, ready to apologize, but she's already pulling away with her eyes crinkled in laughter.

"What did I miss?" he asks.

"Nothing eventful," Stan informs him, ever-so-helpful. "Richie was just talking about his *sexual prowesses*."

They all crack up and Ben joins in, shoulder shaking with laughter against Bill's hand curled against the nape of his neck, the sensation of Bill's own laugh shuddering against him. Maybe it's the scotch and the presence of his soulmate, but there is warmth spreading through his body. *Like a hot summer day*, Ben thinks nonsensically, and the idea is comforting.

A couple of hours later, and their mismatched circle has switched around a bit, joined by strangers with friendly faces, left by some of its original members before they returned again, but somehow it stays mostly the same. Everyone is a little tipsier, especially Richie, who is long past being on the verge of drunk, and Bill, who is inebriated enough that he laughs at nearly all of Richie's bad jokes, and minus Stan, who probably can't feel the effects of alcohol but is still looser somehow. He pops in and out of their conversation as the other residents call for him, reappearing with a witty comment or a piece of pertinent information as if he never missed on the conversation, which Ben guesses he doesn't. Memorably, Stan once reappears in the middle of one of Eddie's strings of family-friendly swears to ask him why he hadn't simply asked him yet to lift the swearing ban - Richie did it, Stan said, hours ago - prompting Eddie to demand he does so he can curse out Richie for not telling him. They all have to hold their sides to keep from splitting open with laughter, and Bill leans against Ben for support as his entire body shakes with it.

Somehow, in the course of these two hours, Bill's hand moves from Ben's neck to the hollow of his hips, then to his jean pockets, then to Bev's neck, brushing away stray hairs from the messy ponytail she hastily made, until it finally lands on her hip and stays there. Ben pretends not to notice.

"So, what did you all do during your lives?" one of their current friendly strangers asks, a kind smile on her elderly face.

If he hadn't looked around the circle to keep his eyes away from Bill and Bev, Ben wouldn't have noticed Eddie gripping Richie's wrist with tense fingers. It is cute, he thinks, that Eddie would already cling to his soulmate that easily.

"I was a risk analyst," Eddie says with a nervous, fleeting smile. "For most of my life."

"He *literally* got paid, what, thousands of dollars to yell at people and tell them everything they were doing was crap," Richie exclaims. His smile is easy and wide. "Do you realize this moron is now doing that to me for *free*? I'm a lucky man."

"Hey, don't make it sound like I'm such an asshole, you asshole!"

Bev snorts. "Aw, you really are a match made in heaven, aren't you?"

The woman chuckles and *aws* at that, not seeming to catch the irony in Bev's words, before she turns her polite smile to Richie. "Your soulmate is such a catch, you lucky man."

"Believe me, I know," Richie says, almost earnestly.

"And what did you do?" she inquires.

Richie gapes at her for a second, clears his throat, starts humming in a quest for words. Ben is almost worried the alcohol and small talk broke him before this train of thought is interrupted by a loud tap and microphone whine, and he turns around to the architect, tall and handsome in his pearly white dapper costume, standing in the middle of the platform he asked Ben to make plans for.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he croons into the microphone, "I hope you are all settling in the neighborhood nice and easy." There is approving chatter among the audience and Ben finds himself nodding. "You all already know me for being the architect of the neighborhood, but I wanted to pop in again to tell you enough how *gleeful* we are to have you all here. Truly. I would also like to thank our vice architect Ben Hanscom, who will be helping me every step of the way to build your perfect neighborhood, for welcoming us into this marvelous home."

Scattered but enthusiastic applause follows, and Ben's cheeks heat up when he looks down at his feet before he feels Beverly's shoulder press against him. He looks up sharply and there she is, cheering with more enthusiasm than the entire room. She beams at him, white teeth

glinting like pearls under the golden chandelier light, and Ben's heart skips a beat.

He simply can't look away, smiling back helplessly until Richie saves him by whooping loudly. Ben turns around to Eddie digging his sharp elbow into Richie's sides with whispered reproaches and suddenly, he is laughing along with Richie.

For a second, everything is fine, basked in golden light and champagne cups and a bubbly feeling that sounds like easy laughter and tastes like joy.

The architect clears his throat. "Yeah, yeah, thanks, Benny! Anyhow, without further ado from an old crone like me, let us hear it from the man of the hour, nay, of the afterlife: a few words from Bill Denbrough!"

They all turn around in unison to Bill choking on his champagne. To his credit, he seems every bit as shocked as them, if not more, as the architect lists his score and various prowesses, and there it is again, buried deep inside Ben's guts, the tiny monster that sharpens his claws on his ribcage and peers over Bill with sickly green eyes and too many teeth. Once again Ben wills himself to shut up before a stream of insecurity and jealousy spills out in his brain, with less success than in the early evening. His rebellious, half-drunk brain doesn't care much for supporting his soulmate's soulmate.

"Bill, you have to go up here," Stan says after Bill stands unmoving under polite applause. (Ben tries not to compare it to his.) "You're the number one point winner of the neighborhood. You're supposed to give a speech."

"I'm supposed to give a whu-whu-what now?" Bill says.

Bev turns towards him, red-and-gold ponytail almost whipping Ben's face in the motion and instead enshrouding him in the sweet fruity smell of her shampoo, takes the few steps necessary to go rest a hand on his shoulder until Bill focuses wide blue eyes on her. That is not, yet, what prompts Ben to startle forward, and really he would not have but for his stutter - Ben has never heard him stutter yet in the couple days since they met, with his slow, poised voice and easygoing

smiles.

So he walks up to him and offers his arm and pretends he doesn't feel as choked up as Bill.

"Come on, I'll help you there," Ben whisper. Bill immediately leans his body against his side with a trust that pours guilt into the heady mix of jealousy and alcohol inside him.

Now, Bill really does seem drunk, slightly dazed eyes running across the room, resting against Ben for support. In the few seconds of the walk up to the stage, two hundred eyes or so pointed on them, the laser beams of their attention blinding under tastefully subdued lights, Ben almost worries Bill isn't going to make it, or is going to make an embarrassment of himself. Yet then they arrive to the steps, and Ben almost doesn't let Bill go alone, but Bill claps his shoulder in thanks, sunny side smile on red lips, and walks up the staircase in fluid motions.

Ben can only stand here in a daze and watch the way Bill's hair catches the room's light.

"Thanks, everyone," Bill says, stutter gone and smile still on. "I'm very glad to be here with you - well obviously, not too glad," he adds to audience giggle like a sitcom laugh track. "I still wish I had finished that last book. But well-

"Oh, if you would excuse me please, Bill," the architect interrupts. "I think we just forgot one itty bitty little thing before starting everything up. Stan, if you would please?"

At the back of the room, Stan makes something that could only be considered as pulling a face before he fades out and appears on stage, this time with a gigantic screen behind him. Ben frowns and looks around the room and sure enough, a few similar screens cut white rectangles into his perfect design all along the room.

There is a whirr, and click, the sounds painfully nostalgic of old classrooms with dust caught on sunbeams as a younger Ben stared out the window in daydreams, and suddenly everywhere is Bill's face. Except it's not quite his: the clear sky eyes are the same, wide and



vibrant, but his cheeks are rounder, his stubble not quite here yet, his hair swept to the side in an orderly fashion, and he pouts in a way only an eight-year-old could get away with. (Ben imagines for an instant an adult Bill grimacing like this and hides his chuckle in his fist.)

Bill doesn't seem too thrown off his rhythm. "Oh, well, I see you picked all the most flattering pictures of me, then. Thank you for that," he complains, but his voice is light, when Ben turns back to him, he's still grinning.

He is so focused on his face that he doesn't notice the pictures swapping until Bill's grin freezes horribly on his face. Turns into a rictus. Ben frowns and raises his head to catch a glance, behind Bill, in the biggest screen, of four people screaming.

The picture is nice and innocuous enough, an all-American family on an all-American park attraction, caught on tape while barreling down a slide in a mini train wagon, one of these automatic pictures the park employees snap and then proceed to sell you for ten pounds.

The older man in a yellow polo shirt throws his arms in the air for the camera, hair swept to the side in much the same way the younger Bill's was. Younger Bill himself whoops behind a woman clutching to the sides of the train wagon, mirroring the other kid in front of her, a small elfish thing in a too-big T-shirt. Either Bill's brother or his friend, but Ben would bet on the former.

The image shifts to another picture of the same fair, the happy family on a bench, a tacky plastic one made to resemble wood that looks more like a comic book drawing brought to life than actual oak. Bill's father is handsome, leaning away with the same easy swagger his son has, with the same grin too, looking more like the Bill Ben knows than the boy next to him with his shy, giggling thumbs up and messy hair. The boy is so adorable there is a pang in Ben's heart. And then again, at the other side of their mother - still gorgeous, two thumbs up to mimic her son, merry-looking - the little boy again, an entire head smaller than Bill, same beaming smile as his mother. Definitely Bill's brother then. With the sunshine creating a halo over his head and the round cheeks and the happiness, he looks more like an angel than an elf this time around. The picture is nice, very nice, too nice,

Ben thinks, than chastise himself, too nice to be true.

Somewhere, speakers are playing Elton John, soft, subdued, perfectly raspy, as he sings *it's a little bit funny, this feeling inside, I'm not one of those who can easily hide*.

And on stage, Bill is a wreck.

"Th-th-th-thank y-you f-for th-th-the i-in-invitation," he tries, but the words are so badly mangled Ben can barely understand them, and the crowd whispers, too. "I r-r-r-ruh-really appreciate i-i-it, buh-buh-but I'm afraid I'm n-nuh-nuh-not th-the buh-buh-best puh-perhson you c-could a-a-ask fuh-for a sp-sp-sp-"

"Speech," the architect provides helpfully.

"Y-y-y-" Bill starts, and pauses, and shakes his head, and he looks so terrible in that instant, eyes crinkled shut - are his hands trembling around his glass? - mouth in a tight white line where it was red and smirking and Ben doesn't know what to *do*.

He doesn't know what to do, but Bev and Richie, storming the stage in a flurry of booze smelling plaid shirt and red hair and dramatics, do.

"You're right, Big Bill! You really don't know shit about making speeches!" Richie says, slurring his words with manic hand gestures, and among the gasps in the crowd, Eddie's loud, prolonged groan stands out. "Luckily I, a st- uh I mean a c- an ex-UN ambassador, am an expert, a scholar, and an intellectual."

"And very good at throwing praise at himself," Bev adds. "Which is just what we need, don't we?"

Ben follows her as she glances at the architect, whose face, in the shadow thrown by the screen, is unreadable. He steps out of the shade with a compassionate expression, nodding approvingly at Richie as he begins rambling in the microphone.

"So, do you guys wanna hear a joke?" he begins. "That's how we start every UN meeting. Just a little bit of jest before we have to discuss, like, climate change and nukes and politicians' sex scandals. Actually,

on the topic of sex scandal - Eddie Spaghetti, dearest, you might have to put your hands over your ears for that part - anyway, sex scandals! Did I ever tell you about that time my girlfriend found out I was masturbating to her friend's Facebook photo? Now, I know what you're thinking, what kind of loser masturbates to Facebook when girls post all their beach selfies on Instagram, but the funny thing is-

As Richie speaks, Beverly ushers a shaking Bill down the steps, throws raised eyebrows in Ben's way as she whispers something in the lines of *are you going to help or just braid daisies into Richie's hair all day*, and Ben hurries to her and Bill to help walk him back to the back. Bev has other plans though, pushing them in the direction of the stairway to the first floor. Under Ben's arm, Bill is muttering a garbled sentence that is probably supposed to be thanking them but doesn't sound anywhere close to English.

Ben waits until they are in the refreshing darkness of the first floor hallway to open his mouth.

"Do you think Richie will distract them long enough?" he asks.

"It's Richie," Bev says with a snort. "He could probably distract a trash can if he put his mind to it."

Somehow, that makes Ben chuckle as he opens the door to Bill's room, and the heavy tension around them breaks apart when Bill follows suit.

"Maybe that's why he was so good working for human rights," Ben tries. "Break them by talking."

"Ugh, that seems so wrong. Just fifteen minutes ago he started throwing shrimps at Eddie because he said he had a seafood allergy, and now you're telling me he gave speech at the UN headquarters?"

Ben peers over Bill to send her a look. "Weren't you the one who threw peanuts back at him and turned it into a food-fight?"

"Irrelevant."

Bill flat out laughs at that. The sound, as shaky and brittle as it is, shrouds Ben in warmth as if a sunbeam somehow pierced through the

window glass and the twilight. Bev laughs, too, and somehow this startles Ben, still looking at her as she throws her head back in a fit of giggles. His smile slides off his face and he watches the way her blue-green-hazel eyes turn grey in the dim light of the night sky, her skin stands out against the darkness in shades of white cutting against her pale dress, and her hair-

She flutters her eyes open again and stares right back at him for only a second before he feels too much and looks down at Bill on the bed again, sitting and tilting his head up at Ben, except it's not really helping to quiet the fast sick beating of his heart so he focuses on the shine of his own dress shoes next to Bill's, the coarse jean of his pant pockets against his skin when he stuffs his hands in them. He focuses on trying not to let his longing roam his face, not to let Beverly see how much he is hers to have even if he would never ask the same of her, because people like her were not meant to be anyone's but themselves'.

(On a later day or a later dream, Bill would straighten up and sneak his hands behind the nape of Ben's neck the way he did at the party, except this time he would pull and bring him down, down until their noses brush and their lips collide and Ben feels like he can breathe again.

Ben would take his hands off his pockets and place them on the other man's shoulders, strong and wiry against him, brush his thumb against his pulse and find it fast and uneven. Less than three feet away Bev would take off her heels and push her toes against the carpet and walk towards them. When Ben would detach from Bill, straightening up until he towers over the man, an apology on his lips, she would be smiling, a soft, vulnerable expression he has never quite seen her wear before, and the apology would die on his lips, and Bill would sneak a hand under his shirt and kiss him right under his navel, and Ben's entire body would shiver until he finally gets to *touch*.

But this is not the future and this is not the dream and Ben's doubt tightens his throat more sharply than hands would and Bill is still hiding his trembling hands under his thighs like a child and Bev's hands are on her cigarettes inside her dress pocket and she has not taken off her heels or her makeup or the confident expression on her

face. So Ben does apologize when he closes the door shut with a click not unlike the slide show's and goes to his room with a monster in his chest and a litany in his head and he does his fifty push-ups before bed with a stone face and does not know whether or not Bill sleeps at all tonight and whether or not Bev empties her cigarette pack.)

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

a big thank you to gabi for being an awesome beta and to everyone who commented or stopped to give kudos on the last couple chapters!!!!!! i try to answer to everyone because you literally are the reason i keep writing and anyway before this gets sappy ily and i hope you enjoyed our not-quite-dead dumbasses (and stanet)

## 4. Flaming! Shrimp! Garbage!

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Richie, if you call our dog fucking Captain Ameripaw, I swear I will chuck you directly into the bad place.”

“What? It’s a good name! Ben likes it, don’t you, Ben?”

### Notes for the Chapter:

hEY i rushed to publish it before midnight on the 31st of October so technically it's still halloween!! hence here is the spooky chapter aka the one where a lot of exposition happens and not a whole lot of reddie (tragically). also ben's gay rights abs wear spandex thank you richie

One would think starting to sleep with his soulmate would be the highlight of Eddie’s first week in the afterlife. One would be wrong.

Something moves against Eddie’s skin, soft smooth fur warm in the crook of his neck, but at first, when he wakes up, he doesn’t remember what it is. Sometimes sleep is so deep and hazy its dreams, even gone long before morning comes, leave reality a blur, and so he can’t quite catch the memories of the past few days. Eddie doesn’t mind letting them slip between his fingers like sand. In the dream, he was someone else, somewhere else, some place so far from him now that it takes him a minute to recall his own name, and is content to watch dust dance in the air and sun filter slowly through the slits of the bedroom window.

Eddie burrows his hands in the soft warmth against his neck and remembers the dog Richie promised was an actual demon as she sighs at the touch, soundly asleep. He sighs too, content, almost ready to go back to sleep-

*he’s dead they’re all dead he has to hide a guy from heaven cops a guy who got drunk at the welcome party in the middle of the vice architect’s*

*house and made a speech about chronic masturbation addiction in public -*  
-before he blows his eyes wide open.

His hand stills on the Pomeranian's fur. Suddenly he can't stop thinking about all the diseases mammals carry with them and wondering whether he can get rabies if he is technically dead. Much like birds, one anxious thought flocks with another, and another, and before he knows it his breathing is shallow and choked up in his throat.

Death-induced meltdown: buy one, get one free!

"Oh my god I'm going to murder you," Eddie groans in his pillow to no one in particular. "I'm going to heaven-murder you until you stay dead."

An arm and half his upper body draped across Eddie, Richie snores against his collarbone in answer, lips wet and soft on his skin.

Under other circumstances, Eddie could tolerate it, maybe even consider it cute, say, if it was someone else, someone whose dental hygiene he truly trusts. From a man who still smells like booze and shrimp and weighs heavily on his bladder, elbow digging at a weird angle, a man who smuggled into *the good place* and more recently ruined everyone's evening by getting drunk, Eddie finds himself being quite generous to not have acted on his threats yet.

"After tonight, you're both sleeping on the couch," he informs a still snoring Richie and their equally snoring tiny dog.

He doesn't himself understand why they chose to sleep in the same bed last night, or rather why he accepted it, since Richie is the most annoying person he has had the misfortune of having to share a room with. Which is a lot to say, considering past housemates included his mother - and Sonia Kaspbrak was no ray of sunshine even on her good days - and an unfortunate college roommate named Ike who could barely speak two words of English without making a terrible grammar mistake, almost got them evicted twice by smoking out the dorm with his weed and left candy wrappers *everywhere*. Needless to say, sophomore Eddie had promptly decided that what he had

dubbed in a fit of dramatics *The College Experience* might not be his cup of tea after all and moved back to his mother's place. There was something to say about the devil you knew.

But this morning, as he would be in a lot of mornings to come, Eddie is grateful for Ben Hanscom. More specifically, he is grateful for Ben telling them, sometime before he left the party to help Bill Denbrough into his room, that there were, in fact, no hangovers in the good place. The gin and wine have washed through his body without leaving his head aching and scrambled, the benefits without the consequences. Maybe Eddie *does* love the good place.

What the gin and wine have left behind, though, is a very full bladder. A bladder pressured by what feels like Richie's entire body weight.

Eddie barely hesitates before deciding, on the remembrance of the no hangover rule, to bring his socked feet up to his hips, place them against Richie's torso carefully, and then, in one sweeping motion, push Richie off the bed.

"WAKE UP, ASSHOLE!"

Richie's long limbs scramble in half consciousness for a hold on the bed sheets, Eddie's body, anything, and come up short- he falls to the floor in a heap. Eddie smirks, satisfied, for half a second until the dog startles with the sudden noises and claws his shoulder as she yelps her way out of the bed. Eddie swears softly when he rubs at the scratch and his fingers come up with blood. No tetanus, he remembers. No shots to get. Not actual blood, either.

Yeah, fuck that, he is totally disinfecting it.

"What," Richie says, voice muffled by sleep, arm thrown over his head, peeking bleary eyes under it, "the hell."

"Wakey wakey, it's twelve thirty, and we're having milkshake for breakfast," Eddie informs him.

"Oh," Richie says. He closes his eyes again. "Cool."

"If you fall back asleep, I'll send the dog to chew on your toes," Eddie



adds. "She's a demon dog, hungry for flesh."

"Ugh, I'm up, I'm up," Richie groans, still lying facedown on the floor and absolutely not moving in any way. "Don't send the demon dog after me. My toes are the moneymakers."

"I mean, it certainly isn't your face," Eddie says, then adds: "Also we need to find her a name that is not demon dog."

"Belzepup."

Eddie pauses. "That was fast. Also no."

"Why not?"

"I would rather die choking on stale bread than let you call my dog Belzepup," Eddie tells him, indignant, then: "Don't say it."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"Well then," Eddie says, prim and proper as he gets up to go to the bathroom, "Don't."

He is already shutting the door close when Richie makes some idiotic afterlife joke, and he slams it with a little more force than necessary before he rolls his eyes. Richie cannot see him, and that is why he allows himself some fleeting pull of his muscles that is somewhat like a hint of a smile. It is not that Richie's jokes are all of a sudden funny. It is that, in this moment, ignoring the dog's frantic barking, locked in his bathroom with sunshine spilling golden honeylight out the window and the comforting ritual of putting disinfectant over a wound, Eddie entertains the thought that, maybe, it will be alright in the end.

That is, of course, when robot shrimps start falling from the sky.

Spandex is too tight and itchy on his skin, which soon enough sticks with sweat under the snug material, and Eddie has to pull a little at the stretch of fabric on the inside of his thigh that keeps rubbing every time he walks. Uncomfortable friction doesn't feel too different

from the telltale tingling of his spine like listening to chalk screech against blackboard that comes with anxiety.

“Can you explain to me again,” Eddie tries, voice cracking with the effort of keeping it low when he wants to scream, “how you think this is not your fault?”

For the past twenty minutes Eddie has been taking care to keep as quiet as he can, but even then his tone keeps rising steadily and breaking with fury and fear. At his right side, as gangly and ridiculous as ever in a classic Captain America costume straight out of the first *Avengers* movie, the exact same costume, in fact, that Eddie is wearing right now, Richie just startles and glances around them in a nervous motion not unlike a rabbit about to get snatched by a bird of prey.

Around them, all the inhabitants of their street are in the same costume. It appeared out of nowhere a little under half an hour ago and for a confused, dazed second Eddie’s head was filled with the nonsensical thought that blue always was his color before he blanked out with panic so thick it was white noise.

Richie fidgets with this glasses. “OK, but Chris Evans played in lots of movies-”

“Richie,” Eddie cuts.

“It’s really reductive to stick a label on him and pretend he’s only been in *Avengers*, I mean, just look at the *Fantastic Four*-”

“*Richie*.”

He pauses, and for a second the only thing they hear are the other people in the street talking in hushed tones, sounding more intrigued and amused than panicked yet. Eddie doesn’t understand them, because he would be absolutely off the rails if something that freaky happened to him and he didn’t know why, but he guesses he can somewhat get it - robot shrimps are a funny concept, and a sudden, forced costume party seems more like a harmless weird prank than anything else. That doesn’t keep everyone from standing outside of their homes, peering curiously and with slight apprehension at the

remains of the shrimp rainfall in front of them, robotic corpses creasing the cobblestone paveway.

The street smells sickeningly like a seafood buffet and burnt plastic.

Silence doesn't last long before Richie opens his mouth again and words burst out in a waterfall, hands moving from fidgeting with his glasses to waving around. "Listen, what do you want me to tell you?"

"Anything!" Eddie whisper-shouts before correcting himself. "Actually, an apology would be nice!"

"An apology for what?" Richie snaps, stepping closer, and Eddie stares back up at him with wide eyes. In the crazy past twenty-four hours, he has seen Richie anxious, laughing, freaked out, amused, annoyed, hesitant, on the verge of a mental breakdown, but not angry, never angry, not yet, not the way he seems to be right now. It's all wrong on his face. "No, tell me, Eddie. An apology for being the worst? For ruining this cutesy perfect *bullshit* place? For getting you off your high fucking horse?"

"Uh, yeah, as a matter of fact, that's exactly what I want you to say," Eddie answers, glaring at Richie and hating that he has to stretch his neck upwards for that.

"Well, you got it, then!"

"Well, thanks for nothing! Because that's the worst apology I've ever heard and our garden still smells like rotten fucking seafood!" And then, because Richie still has that wrong expression on his face and the tension around them makes Eddie's heart pang, he steps back and adds: "And not-Belzepup is trying to eat flaming! Shrimp! Garbage!"

There is an uncomfortable beat where Richie keeps staring, too intense for Eddie to do anything but turn away and half heartedly push the dog away from the shrimp corpse, before he says, still slurring: "Oh, I would have thought rotten seafood smell would make you feel right at home, it's what-"

"Guys, I'm so sorry," Ben's deep voice says out of nowhere.

They both jump a foot away from each other, and sure enough, there

he is, Bill trailing slightly behind him with both hands in his jean pockets, a one-head smaller, more relaxed shadow of Ben. Ben himself is the one standing right in front of them, unnoticed in the middle of their argument, head haloed in the sunshine. Unnoticed for god knows how long, Eddie has no idea - he exchanges a panicked look with Richie, notices the knit between his eyebrows softened a little.

Ben speaks up again. "I'm sorry," he repeats. "I don't know what's happening either. I swear we are all working on getting it under control, and your day activities will resume shortly. We just have to ask you to give us a little time."

In the bright light of the day, behind the official-sounding words, Ben looks every bit like a kicked puppy. Suddenly Eddie feels terrible about every single life choice he has made that led to him putting that expression on the face of the guy who asked Stan for a list of everyone's favorite meals before throwing a welcome party. Which is silly of Eddie, he reasons, since the only person who should feel bad is Richie, who is entirely at fault for everything that is going wrong right now and forever.

Ben also looks every inch the all-American superhero the suit makes him, which is sort of annoying. Eddie steals another glance at Richie, halfway expecting to be mad at him for getting an eyeful of Ben, but he is very much not. In fact, Richie isn't looking anywhere near Ben, but frowning forlornly at his own shoes. A part of Eddie's heart not so different from the one that hurt seeing Ben distressed pangs painfully.

But another part of Eddie's heart recognizes the look on Richie's face and decides to hijack the conversation before he does something stupid, like confess to the vice-architect.

"It's alright, Ben," he says, smiling as gently as he can at the other man. "I mean, it's really not so bad. Now our dog is in this tiny Captain America costume and she's just *adorable*, right, Richie?"

He half expects him to start busting them by talking about demon dogs. Instead, Richie looks up sharply to him, face unreadable, and then breaks into a grin and a dumb, King of Arthur-style voice. "You

bet she is, my kind sire. We shall dub her,” he says solemnly, pausing for dramatic effect, “Captain Ameripaw.”

“Richie, if you call our dog fucking Captain Ameripaw, I swear I will chuck you directly into the bad place.”

“What? It’s a good name! Ben likes it, don’t you, Ben?”

The Ben in question perks up, slightly less miserable than before, a hint of half-smile tugging at his lips, the lines between his eyebrows smoothing a little. “Sorry, I’m not sure conjugal disputes are part of my responsibilities.”

“We’re not asking you as a vice architect, Ben. We’re asking you,” Richie says, putting a hand over his heart, “as a person. A person of taste.”

“We are not asking him anything, asshole, you’re the one bothering him at work,” Eddie protests.

Ben wavers. “I mean, I guess it is kind of cute.”

“*Ha!*” Richie shouts. “Ha fucking ha, Eddie!”

“Oh, beep beep, Richie,” Eddie says, then freezes, because he has no idea where *that* comes from. It is so bizarre and out of place though Richie doesn’t seem to mind, or even notice, shutting up but smiling down at him with his arms thrown up in victory, Breakfast Club style.

Ben doesn’t mind either, as he chuckles, rubbing the back of his hair absently. He promptly excuses himself, Bill lazily waving his hand behind them where he was talking to some other neighbours, because apparently shrimp-rain is serious business in heaven and there are people to comfort and reassure all over the neighborhood - Richie makes a joke about thinking their bond was more special to him than that and Ben rolls his eyes because he is learning, too, to not take Richie too seriously all the time - and work to do. It leaves them on the pavement, looking at each other. There is something soft-jawed and amused on Richie’s face, and for a second Eddie almost thinks he is going to thank him, so he cuts him short by proclaiming, loudly,

that they are late for their meeting, which is true, and that they need to change into non-comics-related clothes, which is also true, and which Richie also balks at.

By the time they get to their meeting point with Mike, about twenty minutes late, Eddie's breath is shallow and irregular and Richie is downright panting. As in, actually bent over, huffing and coughing as if he was going to hack up a lung, fighting for his life. Eddie magnanimously opens the door to the milkshake shop and holds it open for Richie, who does not take this opportunity to come in as he is not moving, too busy agonizing in the pavement, apparently.

"Wow. You really are in terrible shape," Eddie points out. It's gratuitous and extremely satisfying.

Richie moans as he gasps for breath. "*I know.*"

"I mean it, *terrible* shape," Eddie keeps going as Richie finally recovers enough to walk into the shop like a human being and start queueing with him, behind the scattered group of people too polite to stare at Richie's freak show, instead stealing incredulous side glances. "What was that, half a mile? Have you been driven around in a stroller for your entire life? No, seriously, you should get that checked out. I've never seen someone running as slow as-

"Funny you'd say that because *I* have. It was-

"If you say your mom Richie, I swear to God-

"Should we really be still saying swear to God? And not like," Richie has to pause and try to inhale. Eddie hesitates before unzipping his jacket pocket and handing him his inhaler, deciding that he has, after all, disinfectant on him. (The four objects he carries everywhere: an inhaler, disinfectant, aspirin and his wallet.) Richie gasps into it but resumes his sentence immediately afterwards. "Thanks. I don't know, dude, I swear to Ben or whatever?"

Richie hands him back his inhaler naturally, and after a beat of hesitation Eddie slips it back in his jacket without disinfecting it first.

Jury is still out about whether he will do it when they get home. For a second he wonders if he has ever let anyone borrow it, and he can't remember any instance, not even with his ex-wife Myra. On the other hand, they *did* get divorced, so he should not overanalyze it too much. He really tries, choosing to focus on the shop with its eighties dinner decoration, all spotless black-and-white tiles and blaring red leather of the high counter chairs and booths. Plastered across the walls are posters for rock concerts by Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent. Kind of anachronic, really, mid fifties stars' posters in an eighties decor, but of good taste. And not more anachronic than an all vegan options menu, even if Eddie wonders how they even get any ingredients anyway, animal based or not - it's probably one of these afterlife things that are best not pondered about too long. Kind of like Ri- *ah, fuck it.*

Not paying attention to the other man is easier said than done when all Eddie seems to do lately is overanalyze Richie (to perplexing results), his interactions with Richie (which he'd rather ignore), Richie's interactions with the world around them (so far disastrous), and the odds of Richie getting caught (disproportionately high). Even now, standing in the queue, having to pick a flavor and try to peer over the thin crowd to catch sight of where Mike is sitting, Eddie's mind returns to Richie, or rather - it sounds way too romantic to his taste - to Richie's nonsense.

"You think Ben is God?"

"I mean, he certainly looks like it. Like, one of these Greek god statues in the museum? You know the ones?"

"Can you *please* stop fawning over the vice-architect's looks while I'm here, *standing right next to you.*"

"Aw, Eds," Richie coos, bringing up his hands as if to caress his cheeks, which Eddie scarcely avoids by stepping sideways into a random person holding a bright pink drink. "Eds, are you jealous? You want me to compliment your looks too? You know you're just about the cutest, deliciously snack-sized, adorable piece of ass I have ever seen in my not-life."

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I SAID, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE- oh, hi, I'll

take a New York Cheesecake milkshake with coconut milk, please?”

Laughing still, Richie uses his grabby hands to order a California Sunrise On First Day Of Summer Holidays milkshake and three coffees that Eddie is pretty sure are solely for him. The milkshake shop, in spite of its strictly vegan-milkshake-related branding, also sells coffee, buttermilk pancakes, rainbow bracelets courtesy of a neighbour and vegan handmade soap and candles made by another one. Selling, of course, is a weird word, since when Eddie absently starts patting his jacket for his wallet, the owner just laughs and waves him off by blowing a kiss into her hand and mimicking a winning baseball throw at him. Eddie pretends to be relaxed enough to chuckle and not be cynical about the entire thing. When he turns around for half a second and glances at Richie, they exchange equally weirded out grimaces.

Heaven is *weird*.

Richie nudges him, and Eddie is ready to snap until he notices that he is being pushed towards a table in the back of the patio, almost glued against the wall. Mike is sitting there. His tall frame is disproportionate compared to the cute, tiny garden chairs of the outside, head almost brushing under the bright turquoise sunshade that he would probably bang up again if he wasn't slightly bent, deeply invested in his conversation. Next to him, on another red garden chair, is sitting Stan.

Anxiety seizes up Eddie's throat. It's sudden. Unexpected. His head gets cloudy, one hand grasping blindly until it catches Richie's wrist- the other digging in his jacket pocket- *fuck, never here when you need it-* his inhaler. Without thinking about Richie's mouth on it, he triggers it, loud horn noise, takes a good breath. Then-

“What the fuck is he doing here?” he whispers angrily to Richie.

“I don't fucking know,” Richie angry-whispers back. “Do you think-maybe-”

“That they know?”

“*I don't know, dude.*”



"I mean, it's the only explanation, right?"

"Like, there's been a shrimp storm outside one hour ago, how is Stan just sitting here? Shouldn't he be, like. Investigating?"

"There's no way. The guy is heaven Wikipedia."

"Do you think they know that we know that they know?"

"I don't *know*, dude," Eddie says, then straightens up under Stan and Mike's combined curious stares, Stan's eyebrows raised in a silent question, Mike's frowned. "But maybe us whispering to each other for five minutes is a little suspicious."

"OK, OK, you're right, so what's our game plan here? Do we confront them? Threaten them? What do we even threaten heaven Wikipedia with? Breaking their router? Cutting the WiFi?"

Eddie thinks for a beat, and then whispers: "Act dumb. Like you don't know anything about anything," and walks to them with a smile and a too-cheerful greet, not without hearing Richie say something in the lines of *but I don't know anything about anything*.

Richie hollers to Mike and ruffles Stan's hair as he sits down, owing himself a strong glower from the later, even as his hair corrects itself into neatness on its own. Now that's a cool party trick. Not that Eddie would say that out loud, because as much as Richie seems indifferent to the very real possibility of Stan finally snapping after being asked too many dumb questions, Eddie isn't.

"Stan the not-man!" Richie says, cheerful as ever. "What are you doing here, on this fine, shrimpful morning?"

"It's almost two in the afternoon," Stan sighs.

"We were talking about the library," Mike says, and smiles, tired face turning bright and sunny when he does. "Stan has been a lifesaver helping me set it up."

The Stan in question just shrugs and doesn't point out the unfortunate choice of word that makes both Eddie and Richie wince. Where Eddie recovers quickly, he catches Richie leaning towards Stan

with something like curiosity and delight for some reason, and he promptly digs his elbow into his sides. First priority, he tries to telepathically transfer to Richie in a look, is to get Stan away from them so they can talk to Mike alone. As much as a resident learning about Richie's secret would be bad, Eddie can't seem to figure out Stan, who is neither an authority figure like the vice architect - of whom Eddie isn't too worried, since he is the embodiment of sugar and spice and everything nice, as long as they manage to mostly keep up the pretense around him - or the architect, who Eddie has barely seen outside of his welcoming him in his office and the party. From what he understood, there is some sort of privacy agreement in place with Stan, but Stan is also way more judgemental than your usual Google search bar, so who knows?

He tries to convey all of his in A Look to Richie, who just shakes his head in confusion. Great. So this is going to take much longer than Eddie would have wanted, much longer than would be preferable considering the circumstances, and-

"Anyway, I have to go," Stan says briskly, getting up from his chair. "Not that I don't enjoy everyone's company, but rumor is," and he smiles, a dry thin one, like this is the height of hilarity: "I do have a hundred and three giant shrimp cadavers to clean up before tomorrow."

Upon further inspection, behind his groomed veneer, Stan looks *exhausted*. His eyes are circled by deep, dark circles, and his hair is still perfectly in place but more lackluster than it was last night, and Eddie realizes, without really having thought about it before, that his energy is probably linked to the neighborhood's order in much the same way Eddie is dependant on having eight hours of sleep a night and three meals a day. This, right now, this disorder and *mess* and general state of chaos, must be torture for him.

"Hey," Mike catches him with a hand on his wrist with easy warmth "I meant what I said, I'll come help you clean up as soon as we're done here."

"Me too," Eddie says, surprising himself and Stan, who glances at him with wider eyes than usual. He smiles a little, and Stan smiles back, grateful.

“Uh,” Richie says. “Me three, I guess.”

“Cleaning is supposed to tidy things up, you know, Richie, not throwing more garbage all over my neighborhood.” Stan says. Panic flares again in Eddie’s chest before he realizes Stan is still smiling and it’s - probably - his weird way of doing funny banter. Richie certainly seems to find it hilarious, though it is likely just nerves cracking up, as Mike seems equally confused. “Just thought I would tell you *before* you start destroying the place. I know this is your first time.”

“Oh, please be gentle with me, Staniel,” Richie starts, but Stan rolls his eyes, waves them all goodbye and disappears mid-sentence with a loud popping sound.

And then it’s just Mike, Eddie and Richie, most of the other patrons having moved on from desserts a while ago. Mike, Eddie, Richie and finding a way to address the giant robot shrimp in the room.

“Ayo, Mike,” Richie says in a pirate voice, inexplicably: “me and my mate over ‘ere were just wonderin’, you know...” A pause and Eddie is absolutely certain Richie has no idea what to say next either, mostly because it was Eddie’s half-assed plan and Richie still doesn’t know who Mike even is.

“If you’d give us lessons,” Eddie finishes. Then, faster: “We want to take philosophy lessons. Ethics lessons, actually. On, uh, how to do good actions. Be a better person. All that c- all that.”

“Hum. We do?” Richie says, blinking. Eddie kicks him under the table. “Yeah! Yeah, that’s definitely what we want to do.”

Mike doesn’t seem peeved, per say, mostly just confused. He leans back in his chair, spreading one of his long legs between the legs of Richie’s chair, the other one drawn up under the table, and his fingers tap against his milkshake glass, once, twice, three times. Then, finally: “You’re in the good place, with access to just about anything you could ever wish for, and you want to use that time to take philosophy lessons?”

“Yes! We’re very interested in, uh. Philosophy,” Richie ends lamely.

Eddie is pretty sure he was trying to find a philosopher's name and fell short, mostly because this is also what Eddie is doing right now.

"That's what heaven is for you?" Mike asks again, incredulous.

"I mean, what does being in the good place even mean," Eddie tries, smelling his own bullshit and hoping Mike doesn't, "if you don't follow your perpetual quest for self-improvement?"

"Yeah! What he said," Richie agrees.

"Uh," Mike says, eyebrows slowly raising on his forehead.

"Like," Richie starts again, and Eddie braces himself against the inevitable moment he says something stupid and ruins it for all of them, "isn't that what, uh, Socrates said? That, like, evil is born from ignorance, right? And self-awareness is the best way to do good. So, hum, if we don't keep trying to learn more about the world, how can we even call yourself good persons, you know?"

Eddie stills, then turns around to stare at him in shock. What the *fuck*.

In answer, Richie only shrugs, a bit helpless, as if being surprisingly aware of philosophy concepts is casual knowledge for a stand-up comedian, like owning a loyalty card at Nando's or hiding a passion for one's crystal ducks collection.

"Actually, you're sort of right," Mike says. He hesitates shortly before he smiles again. "That could be pretty interesting. And a nice way to launch library activities, too. Making some sort of a, hum, a philosophy book club. About being Good. And what being Good means. And can Good even be something you are, isn't it something you do? That would be interesting."

"Right!" Eddie says. Richie doesn't add anything, all out of wisecracks and strokes of genius for the day.

"Yeah! That'd be nice! We could bring coffee, or tea, and some food, something baked, and do it in the floor above the library, I have a couch there, it would actually be very nice-" Mike begins to ramble, and Eddie isn't ashamed to say he sort of tunes out, not because Mike

isn't interesting - he is - but because he can't believe they got away with any of it. Any of it.

Reddish pink clouds are still hanging over the sky following the shrimp rain. Soon Eddie will have to put on plastic gloves to pick out seafood incrustated in between cobblestones even though he is allergic. He knows, really, that they still have a long way to go, but Richie's hand pokes his thigh once, twice, three times, and when Eddie finally looks up at him an irritated *what?* dies on his lips because his smile is faint but definitely grateful as he mouths *thank you*. For another weird, disjointed moment of Richie's warm thigh against his and finger still poking his flesh and eyes searching his, Eddie lets himself believe, just a little, that it *will* be fine.

He instantly searches the sky for any more catastrophe falling on their heads. Maybe a nice coconut milk shower. But there is nothing new in sight. The only milk there is is in his milkshake glass with foam dripping along its sides because he frankly forgot about it and in the sweetened cup of coffee Richie grabbed for him.

## 5. i like big books and i cannot lie

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Why,” Mike begins, solemn but not sure how to end this sentence before picking a lighthearted: “would a bear fight a shark?”

“Why does anyone fight anyone?” Richie says, nonsensical as ever: “Money. Power. Glory.”

“Honey,” Ben tries.

“The bear had sex with the shark’s wife and the shark went crazy with the revelation,” Bev says.

### Notes for the Chapter:

\*slaps mike’s abs like a car hood\* this bad boy can fit so much yearning in it

So what if Mike doesn’t have a soulmate? He doesn’t need one anyway. His soulmate will be *books*.

It could be, after all: in the afterlife, much like during his days on Earth, he remains surrounded by bookshelves filled from the floor to the ceiling with old manuscripts and new copies alike. And in the afterlife, much like on Earth, he takes care of them. He is every bit as meticulous with its small-town library as he was back in Derry, a familiarity that would almost be cagey except for how this time around he doesn’t have a limited small town budget and limited small-town minds to butt against his every decision. He can actually do what he wants, can finally set up these exhibits about the hidden history the Derry Decency Committee constituted of old white women who missed their PTA days never wanted him to show, can present actually interesting books shown to an invested audience, god, even choose his own decoration. Mike is happy. He is.

He just needs to tell that to the heartache roaming his chest like a hungry wolf.

“Are you ready?” Stan asks him, slightly tilting his chin towards Mike. He always has to tilt his chin up to address him, from Mike’s towering height to his regular-sized frame, and it makes him look more human somehow.

Not that he doesn’t look human, per se - this isn’t exactly the right way to word this though Mike is in lack of a better one - but most of the time, Stan is more similar to a human-in-training, maybe, all perfect posture and quiet neutrality and delicate, unblemished skin. Even now, surrounded by an old, creaky leather couch, a plush loveseat, and a colorful set of mismatched chairs they got from the library, which is conveniently right under Mike’s apartment on the third floor of the building, he insists on standing upright in the middle of Mike’s living room. His posture is perfect, straight like a pole, his hands linked together behind his back. It only makes Mike want to fuss more, offer him a cup of tea and a seat, guide him towards the couch with a hand on his back, though he doubts the other man would appreciate it.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess. You know, you can sit down, Stan,” Mike says instead. Gently. He always tries to be gentle with Stan. Some of the residents talk to him on a brisk tone, not unlike the one they would use while asking a GPS for directions or facing an automatic answering machine, which makes Mike uneasy, fidgeting in a way he has learned to link to a sense of vague, repressed anger. (As his father taught him many years ago, it is dangerous for men like Mike in a small town like Derry to be angry. Some habits are hard to let go of.)

“Why would I?” Stan shrugs off.

“You don’t have to, it’s just, if you’re going to stay for a while, you might as well make yourself comfortable.”

Stan stares at him, head tilted on the side and eyes intently on Mike as if he was a human-shaped puzzle. As if Stan wasn’t the intriguing one. Mike can see the other man keeping himself from asking again *why*, and instead, Stan wonders out loud “I’m staying?” only to correct himself and say: “Oh, of course, I was just planning on making everyone a drink before I sat down.”

Just a couple of weeks ago, at the vice architect's party, Stan refused to summon a whiskey and Coke for a very drunk and impolite guest, because he was, quote-unquote, *not an oversophisticated vending machine*. Mike doesn't point that out because Stan would just tell him it was his night off - whatever *that* means - and retreat in his own head, distant and cloudy in the way he gets sometimes. And so Stan disappears into the kitchen. For a second Mike remains still, listening to the gentle thud of Stan's always spotless Oxfords against the carpet, aimless, fidgeting with the sleeves of his flannel shirt. He glances around, searching for something to do before his guests arrive in less than a dozen minutes, ends up walking up to the blackboard Stan materialized for him, and writing in a pretty, looped cursive that is nowhere near his usual chicken-scratch: *how to do good?*

If he then wipes off *good* and rewrites it twice, it's because he is unsatisfied, not nervous. If he straightens up bookshelves and props up throw pillows, it is only because he knows his apartment is on the cozy side, a snug space covered in wooden floors that match the visible beams on the chalk-white ceiling and the cedar coffee table in the middle of the living room. Already it is stamped by darker circles from steaming cups brought down on no coaster. Before Stan arrived Mike covered it with a cloth. Not a lot of people would have noticed the way Stan's eye twitched at the sight the first and only time Mike brought him up for a cup of tea, but Mike did, and it is Stan's neighborhood after all. Still he can't help fussing over it, checking that it is perfectly symmetrical as if Stan hadn't taken care of that already.

"I've done that already," Stan informs him from somewhere next to his shoulder and Mike startles - there was no gentle thud this time but the loud sound not unlike a computer logging on that comes with Stan teleporting anywhere.

"I know," Mike says, frowning but still accepting the cup of coffee with outstretched hands because Stan always gets the exact right amount of milk and the perfect temperature. "I'm just checking."

"Oh, if you're just checking, then," Stan says. His eyebrows are quirked, quite annoyingly smug about Mike's nervosity for someone who glances at all the chairs around him in one hesitating sweep



before he sits down on the closest, most uncomfortable-looking one in an awkward, disjointed motion. "Guess you really are not nervous."

"Guess I really am-" Beat. "Did someone just knock?"

"Yes," Stan says, bringing his own cup to his lips. "Your guests are early. Bill Denbrough always arrives ten minutes late to all of his meetings, and Beverly Marsh five, but Ben Hanscom is very punctual. I think he's a good influence on them." Then, seeming very pleased with both Ben and himself: "I made him an espresso."

Until ten minutes ago, Mike had no idea who Beverly Marsh was, which apparently means that by now she acts like his best friend of thirty years. She slides into his kitchen with disturbingly familiar ease, sliding her hips behind the counter to grab cups filled with various contents of the liquid type that Mike is sure will somehow fit perfectly each of his invitee's preferences, because Stan made them. Light catches on her red hair as if she was a fixed point in his tiny apartment, cramped already with five people occupying it.

"I really like your place," she says. "It feels so homey."

For pretty women with cascading hair and easy laughs, most places must feel like home, but Mike doesn't tell her so. "I guess you could say it's cozy at least. Not exactly Ben's mansion, but then again, not much can compare, can it?"

"Oh, I'm sure if you wanted a bigger place-" she starts, turning around so fast her hair whips against his shoulder.

Mike laughs. "Oh no, trust me, I *really* don't. All that dusting he must have to do. God help me."

"Don't even joke about it, I keep waiting to see if there's dirt in here. I swear, if their version of heaven includes scrubbing bathrooms, I quit. If there's laundry I might actually jump straight downstairs."

"That bad, uh?" he smiles.

She nods very seriously. "A form of torture."

Mike snorts, then comes up short of anything to add to the banter and settles on: "I didn't know you were Ben's soulmate. From the way you and that Bill guy stick together, I assumed you were his. I feel a bit dumb about it now."

He also, incidentally, feels dumb about his candidness, because her mock seriousness freezes on her face, stuck in place for just a second with slightly parted lips and eyebrows not quite frowning before it shifts into a more guarded sort of tight-lipped smile. "Well, you don't have to feel dumb. He is."

It's Mike's turn to frown. "But you live with Ben?" he asks, confused. Is that a vice architect thing?

"Ben," she begins, pausing to wet her lips a little, "is also my soulmate."

All of the warmth of the easy atmosphere turns into a sudden, disquieting calm. Mike has to mull it over a few times in his head before he opens his mouth again, still frowning. "Wait a second. You have *two* soulmates?"

"What? It's not like I chose to," she says immediately, on the defensive. "I'm not, like, hoarding them. It just *happened*."

"Oh no no no, it's not what I meant, it's just-" he cuts himself, considers making a joke to lighten the mood, can't think of any, then tries again, staring at his hands, short clipped nails, long fingers. "It's pretty crazy that you have two soulmates when some people get none, you know?"

Realization dawns on Beverly, and she tries not to let it show in the soft *oh* that escapes her lips. She does her best but even then she can't quite hide her compassion in the way her eyes grow wider and her hand reaches for his just a second before pulling back awkwardly. She is right to do so - Mike wouldn't appreciate being pitied while in eternal bliss - and god knows she probably wouldn't either.

"I'm sorry," she says, and winces at her own words.

"It's alright," Mike lies, poorly, smiling at her only to reassure her that it is, in fact, alright: Beverly seems like a lovely woman, and he would hate to hurt her feelings. "I'm not really the soulmate type, actually," except he is. "Can you imagine having to put up with the same person for all of eternity?" That sounds very romantic. "Now *that* seems unrealistic," no it *wouldn't*, "if we're talking about launching ourselves directly into the bad place. No offense."

"None taken," Beverly says, smiling back gracefully even if he doubts he convinced her. "Sometimes I do want to launch myself directly into the bad place. God, *men*. Just yesterday Bill asked me if he was supposed to iron his socks."

"You know I can hear you saying my name from the living room, right?" Bill calls out.

"Only good things, honey," she half-shouts back.

Bill's snort is loud enough that it travels through the wall, but it's Stan who answers when Beverly and Mike walk back in with a trayful of cups and glasses. "Did you actually think you were supposed to iron your socks?" he asks with the eager but horrified look of a man in the woes of morbid curiosity.

"Hey, it was a valid question!" Bill protests.

"No it was not," Stan and Beverly say at the same time and in wildly different tones - Stan blinks, surprised, but Beverly starts laughing and holds out her hand for him to high five and, after a beat, he follows with a smile.

"How was I supposed to know?," Bill complains, but there's a smile on his face, slow and effortlessly charming.

"Have you ever done laundry in your entire life, Bill?" Mike asks, nice enough that it doesn't sound accusatory in the way it would have from Stan or Beverly.

"I have done," Bill starts, "so much laundry."

Stan shoots him an unimpressed look. "A dozen times in college before you snuck your clothes in your housemates' laundry bags

doesn't count as so much, Bill."

"I'm a laundry expert," Bill insists, and they all chuckle at that. "I am!"

"Of course you are, Big Bill," Beverly says, rubbing his shoulder as she sits down next to him on the couch. Ben hovers awkwardly next to them and to the couch that is too small for three grown human beings before sitting down on the floor next to Beverly. Mike starts to protest, then thinks better of it, not wanting to put him on the spot - they both know they are waiting for two more persons who will need a seat anyway.

Five persons total jotted down their names on the sheet stuck to the milkshake and froyo shops, the noticeboard, and the library itself, though the latter has not opened yet. First, Ben Hanscom signed up in neat handwriting, probably, Mike thought, because as vice architect he wanted to show his involvement in all neighborhood-related initiatives. Ben had also inquired with genuine interest mixed to his usual politeness about the library when they had briefly met at the party, leaving Mike somewhat warmer in spite of the miserable tight iron chain pressed against his heart watching all the happy couples around him, fitting so neatly with each other. Then Bill Denbrough, who Mike knew from reading his books, and Beverly Marsh, her letters round and large, following her two soulmates. Eddie and Richie had added their names almost as an afterthought even though they were the ones who asked him for the club to begin with.

"Do you know when Richie and Eddie," in Beverly's mouth it sounds like one word. Richandeddie, "are coming in?"

"They're running late so it should be right about," Stan pauses for one, three, six seconds, "now."

In the entrance the door thuds against the wall when someone - almost definitely Eddie - thrusts it open but the noise is lost by someone shouting: "For the LAST TIME, Richie, NO, the shark would not JUST CHOMP CHOMP the bear, the bear would win the fight, bears literally EAT FISH to LIVE, AND SHARKS ARE BASICALLY JUST BIG FISHES WITH TEETH."

Stan winces as Ben frowns, confused, and says quietly: “No they’re not.”

“Please open a book,” Stan adds, and Mike, standing over his chair, rubs a comforting thumb over his shoulder.

For all his annoyance, he smiles up at Mike, and the casual warmth of it travels through Mike’s body. This is not quite the sensation that lingers on, though, when Richie and Eddie come into the room and very naturally let the others in on the shark bear debate. If he didn’t know any better, watching these six idiots with hands cupped around their steaming mugs of tea and coffee, Mike would maybe call it power.

“Why,” Mike begins, solemn but not sure how to end this sentence before picking a lighthearted: “would a bear fight a shark?”

“Why does anyone fight anyone?” Richie says, nonsensical as ever: “Money. Power. Glory.”

“Honey,” Ben tries.

“The bear had sex with the shark’s wife and the shark went crazy with the revelation,” Bev says.

Meanwhile, Richie climbs into the loveseat, laying with his head by one of the armrests and his calves on the other, feet dangling in the air. Eddie complains to him in a not-so-low voice that he’s taking all the *space, dipshit*, as the rest of them pretends not to hear.

“Why would a bear have sex with the shark’s wife?” Stan starts, and for a second Mike thinks he might have to explain the joke to him before he goes on, prim and proper: “It’s 2019, Bev. Let him have sex with the shark’s *husband*.”

Bev bursts in ugly laughter while Eddie gasps and interrupts his rant to Richie to say “Oh my god it’s a *bear bear*.”

“A what now?”

“A bear bear. Like, a bear, as in the animal, but he’s also a bear, as in-”

“Oh my god,” Richie says, widening his eyes comically behind his glasses. “I can’t believe it. My soulmate is... So gay.”

Eddie frowns at him from where he is sitting, on the end of the love seat where Richie’s thighs rest with his own legs strewn above his, an obviously uncomfortable position for the both of them though neither accepts to relent.

“Richie,” Mike says, slowly. “You’re gay.”

He scoffs. “I’m not.”

“Your soulmate is a man,” Bill says, taking a sip of his Earl Grey and leaning forward to rest his hand on Ben’s shoulder behind him and Beverly as Ben nudges him and mouths something that could be either *bisexual* or *asexual* or *aseptic*.

Richie wags his finger at him: “Well, you got me there.”

“Get your own jokes,” Eddie snaps, “and stop quoting ten-year-old memes.”

“Actually, this is from season two episode nine of Catfish, so it’s only been aired six years ago,” Stan says, disinterested.

“Stan, whose side are you on?”

“Bold of you to assume I’d ever take either of your sides.”

Mike cracks up at that, and Stan smiles to himself, pleased and quiet.

“Alright, guys, but listen, is this taking place in our world,” Bill says, leaning on his elbows, very serious: “or in movie world?”

“What? What kind of question even is that?” Eddie asks.

“Because,” Bill continues, ignoring the interruption, obviously taken in his train of thoughts: “if it’s not in our world, I have one wuh-word for you: *sharknado*.”

Richie whoops in celebration of Bill’s support, even as Eddie protests that of *course* *t* his is not happening in sharknado world, why would

it be happening in sharknado world, and Ben asks what sharknado is in a low voice to Beverly, who raises her voice to explain: "Sharks. Tornado."

"Like," Ben tries, "sharks in a tornado, or-"

"No, Ben, like a tornado. But made of sharks."

"Wait, how would that even work-"

"Don't try to make sense of it, Ben," Mike advises. "You'll only hurt your brain."

"It doesn't!" Eddie complains. "And that's why bears would win."

"Oh, yeah," Beverly says, cocking her eyebrows in his direction. "Because Winnie the Poo is so intimidating."

"Yeah, he doesn't have *pants* , Eddie," Richie adds. "I mean, of course I would usually respect the strength of a guy who walks bare ass in the street-"

Bill snorts into his tea most ungracefully, almost spitting out his mouthful, and Bev thuds at his back.

"Stop ruining Winnie the Poo, Richie," Mike tells him.

"Yeah, it's not his fault he doesn't have money for pants, Richie," Bev mimics.

"Exactly. Don't be classist," Mike adds.

For some inexplicable reason, this sets Stan into a fit of giggle that resonates through Mike's ribs, his body still touching Stan's as he stands behind his sitting frame.

"*Winnie the Poor*," Stan just supplies unhelpfully to all of their confused expressions.

They start smiling too, painfully wide, even if it's more about Stan losing his marbles over it than his incoherent sense of humor. With his eyes crinkled and his head a little bent, he looks younger

somehow, carefree in a way he never usually is, in a way that brings a very different pang inside Mike's ribs. Carefully, he unclutches his hands from the back of Stan's chair and goes to stand near the blackboard instead.

"Alright, on these wise words, if you're ready, we should probably begin," Mike says, rubbing his hands against each other, the feeling of his own smooth skin comforting somehow. They all stop chatting in between themselves to stare at him, drying his throat instantly.

Stan looks up at him and smiles in encouragement. Curls of dark hair fall a little in front of his eyes when he does that, and it doesn't make Mike's throat any less dry, somehow, but it does get him started.

Somehow, the philosophy book club becomes a thing.

Mike can't quite explain to himself *how* it happens, apart from how Richie and Eddie are weirdly motivated, and the three others seem relieved for the company. To this day they still have a strange, disjointed energy to them when in the same room, as if they hadn't quite learned how to breathe when together yet. He is not complaining, though: seeing them every other day is the only socialization he gets that isn't him asking Stan for advice about the library, which is due to open next week, or about the books he studies for hours on end to write down his classes. It's nice. It's a nice change, being around other people. His daily life is not so isolated anymore, even if mostly it stays *quiet*, the sort of silence that comes with hours spent researching ethics books and peering at them under window-filtered sunlight, with empty tables and unpopulated bookshelves. Maybe, though, this is what happiness is. Mike supposes it could be.

The issue, Mike thinks, doesn't so much reside here, in this habit of his, as much as in his growing certainty that he is festering a growing crush on Stan, blooming over his ribcage like ivy and moss invade a tree. When he was a child his father took him to the forest, which was as close to a scouting trip as it got for the homeschooled freak kid in a small American town: he showed him how to tell a cut tree's age from the spacing and number of the rings on its stump then



pointed at an old oak covered in ivy, taught him the Latin for it, *hedera*. Told him ivy climbing trees would ultimately crumble them, for it ate their soil and caught their light and drank their water until it became so heavy old trees could snap under strong wind, and it had no natural pest or disease to regulate its uncontrollable growth.

This is what his infatuation feels like sometimes - like if Stan knew about it or if his fingertips did more than graze Mike's skin it would carry him away and bring him to pieces. Like Mike could crumble - like something in his heart is overgrown.

"What are you thinking about?" Stan asks, sounding sort of irritated.

They still have a lot of work to do and he is kind enough to help out and Mike is spacing out. He flounders. "Uh, nothing, just-" he digs into his head for something he could say- "do you think we should add some flowers? Maybe at the windows?"

Stan's distasteful frown says exactly what he thinks of wet earth and green growths near ancient books, but still, ever-so-helpful: "What sorts?"

"I don't know, I just thought it might make it more lively, you know? Warmer. Someplace like home," Mike tries, shrugging mid-sentence and absolutely improvising. "Or maybe it's dumb-"

"No no no," Stan says quickly, "it's not. You're not wrong, this does miss something a little more... Personable. I'm going to think it over, see what would be a good fit."

Mike smiles. He can't help it- it's the way Stan hurries to make him feel valuable. "Thanks, Stan. You really don't have to-"

"I'm here to help," Stan cuts, and smiles back tight and thin, but true.

"Oh, really? I thought you were here to discreetly insult me and play innocent," someone says behind them, and even if Mike didn't know they were supposed to meet Richie and Eddie at the milkshake place, he would recognize him by the way Stan rolls his eyes, just a little bit, but still moves his legs primly to the side of his chair to make

space for the gang of Richie's limbs, hands curled into loose fists on his lap.

"Doing God's work, clearly," Eddie says as he sits down, pulling the chair away from the table like a normal person while Richie twirls his around and plops down with his legs spread around its back as a cowboy would in a bad western.

"You know me," Stan deadpans. He bends forward to pick with his spoon at Mike's milkshake - flavored Nondenominational Holiday Dinner Five Minutes Before Your Drunk Uncle Starts Talking - and his elbow pushes against Mike's forearm. "I live to serve."

"You two are surprisingly on time," Mike points out. They are: it's only five minutes past their meeting time.

"Well, you know what I always say. It's never too late for self-improvement!" Richie says, cheerful.

"You have literally never said that, ever, fuckface," Eddie says.

"He's right," Stan contributes, then frowns like he severely regrets getting involved in a Richie-and-Eddie fight.

Richie pouts in a way Mike would call dramatic and the two others would call obnoxious. "And here I thought you loved and supported me, my sunshine, my love, my Eddie Spaghetti-"

"If you call me that one more time-"

"How is this always how milkshakes with you guys end," Mike sighs, amused.

"What? It's not always how they end!" Eddie protests.

"It kind of is, though," Richie says.

"Shut the fuck up, Richie."

Mike tries to hide his smile and fails. "At least this time please don't throw any milkshake anywhere."

“Are you kidding me?” Richie asks. “I don’t want Stan to come into my room at night and eat my toes because I ruined his favorite shirt.”

Stan makes a face. “Don’t worry, I would never, ever come anywhere near your *feet*, Richie.”

Then there is a five minutes long mess where Richie tries to take off his shoes and wiggles his toes near Stan’s face and Stan keeps pushing him away and yelling incoherently, Mike grabbing both his and Stan’s milkshakes to save them from the scramble that is one second away from toppling the table at any moment. For once not the one throwing drinks around, Eddie keeps his safe near his chest, sipping from times to times at Richie’s, which he took after just a few seconds of visible hesitation - Mike jokes that his ethics lessons are working too well and Eddie’s laugh comes offbeat and a little forced.

Once Stan remembers he can disappear out of reach and both Richie and he calm down, they settle again around the table. Richie ignores Eddie handing him his drink in favor of directly drinking from the straw as Eddie carries it before he gets back to their conversation like nothing of importance happened: “I have no idea what you mean, Mikey, I feel like our little double dates always end great.”

Just like that, Mike’s throat dries up, blood rushes to his ears and cheeks that he is grateful Stan can’t see, and in spite of his insistence to keep them on Richie in front of him his eyes strain with the desire to observe Stan’s reaction. When Eddie starts telling Richie that he is *such an asshole, ohmygod*, Mike can’t focus on it, the familiar argument a distant buzzing in his ear, almost soothing him as he retreats out inside his head.

He knows.

He knows how desperate of him it is - the sad, lonely librarian developing a crush on Stan. How cliché. He knows, really, that this is a hopeless infatuation, made by a forlorn brain in lack of meaningful human connection, about someone who is a cross between a marble statue, an angel and an artificial intelligence filled with encyclopedic knowledge, someone who is *made* to care about him, as a statistic in

the field of information that is the neighborhood. Sometimes it is so easy to forget that Stan isn't real, that he is just whoever Mike wants him to be. Sometimes he shows just enough actual emotion that Mike remembers all of the rest, the thoughtful comments and unending help and genuine interest in the library is for his benefit.

"Looks good," Stan says behind him as Mike fixes up a banner that says LIBRARY OPENING: TODAY, 6 PM. DRINKS ARE FREE, SPILLING ON BOOKS IS NOT!, "even if you rejected my proposition to add that they are obligated to use coasters."

"Wow, Stan, tell me how you really feel," Mike laughs.

After a hesitant second when Stan just looks up at him, startled blue eyes blown wide in surprise, every bit like a wild animal staring at the strange cameraman after a flash, he throws in a hesitant, tight smile. Somehow even this small sign of emotion in Stan's neutral poise warms Mike to his core.

"I'm just saying, I saw them all at the party, and there were probably only three people out of four using the coasters provided to them by Ben," Stan says, and then adds, frowning, so indignant it turns into cute: "I'm pretty sure I saw Richie empty his beer in a potted plant at some point."

Mike smiles and asks, curious: "Pretty sure? If you're an omniscient being managing the neighborhood, aren't you meant to see everything that is going on around here?"

"I'm trying to use more colloquialisms in my everyday language to seem more relatable to all of you."

"Oh," Mike says, at a loss, then: "Is that why you changed your outfit, too?"

He is right: instead of the striped shirt Stan welcomed them in, he is wearing the same sort of colored bird shirt and fitting slacks he had on at the party. It suits him. Mike thinks he looks nice, and sort of wants to tell him so, because it would get Stan to make that slight tight-lipped smile he sometimes has. But the words shrivel up and die on his lips before he gets around to, and anyway, that is when Stan

shrugs and walks away from him to straighten up the banner so that it stays perfectly horizontal.

“No,” he says. He has to stand on his tiptoes on the ladder, back stretching out underneath his shirt, sleeves rolled up to his biceps, where Mike simply had to raise his arms. “This is just an outfit I keep for special occasions. Important ones.”

“Aw, thank you,” Mike says, smiling again.

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m glad to know somebody at least cares about tonight. I mean, I guess it is only natural you would, considering you’re *supposed* to care for the entire neighborhood’s well-being, but...” Mike trails off, not wanting to voice his fear that maybe no one will even want to come.

Stan freezes, the long fingers of his hand brushing against the banner before they close into a fist again and he climbs down the ladder. Mike rushes towards him to help him step off, his hand meeting Stan’s elbow, careful as if he was some fragile, bird-boned thing, all his attention turned on the other man’s shining shoes stepping off the last wooden bar lightly. When he looks up and eases the frown out of his face to smile at Stan again, he is already staring back at him, brows furrowed, neck craned upwards, and Mike thinks, not for the first time, of how easy it would be to kiss him.

Truth is, Mike is just one step above men who fall in love with love bots, and he knows it. But Stan has to crane his neck to meet his gaze from the good head Mike has over him, and his lips are parted and kissable even as his eyelids close into half slits and his brows draw up a line on his forehead, and in moments like these Mike forgets.

“You think I only care about the library because I care about the neighborhood?” Stan asks.

Mike shakes himself out of it and steps away. In his crush-induced daze, he has to shake his head out of it, bewildered. “Uh,” he says intelligently, “sorry, what?”

Stan is silent for a minute, and then: "Oh my god."

Mike frowns, confused: "Uh, I'm sorry, what-"

"Oh my god," Stan repeats. "You think I'm a robot. Just like the others do."

"What?" Mike doesn't understand how fast this conversation derailed. "Wait, no, of course not-

"You think," Stan speaks over him, "that I am just some emotionless - blank - *automat* here to, what, bring you books when you want them?"

"What?" Mike asks, again - the entire argument feels surreal to him, in the way a non-negligible amount of his days feels, and he doesn't quite know what to say, can't bring himself to ponder it over, when nothing makes sense. He just knows that Stan looks stressed, distressed, not in the way most people would with a snarl but with a shake in his head, hands grasping at his own arms in periodic fits of nervous energy, curled up inside himself as he gets sometimes, when Richie pushes too far or someone vexes him. Mike wants to make it better. He desperately does, but he has no idea what's gotten into Stan, let alone what he can do to help. "Stan, you're my *friend*."

Stan laughs, a short, clipped, cold sound. He's still not looking at him. "Oh, that's just *great*. Even better."

"Stan," Mike says again, not quite knowing what to add. "I don't understand why you're mad. Please tell me, so I know what I can do to fix things."

Because that is what Mike does. He fixes things - he finds solutions, ways out, spends nights at the library fighting off sleep and the words of someone else, *understanding*.

Stan, though - Stan is a mystery. He usually is, even with his odd rituals and nervous tics, his arrivals always on time and appearance always on point, even with his perfect order, for how all of these neat little things throw Mike's head in a rush. Make him feel lost in time and space, with the presence achingly familiar and unpredictably,

consistently new. Shiny. A special glow to him, to Stan, that Mike can't quite explain, except for how Stan is precious, *wanted*.

So Mike doesn't understand Stan, lets him be more of a puzzle than an open book - and sometimes he doesn't like it, doesn't like his compass going haywire - but even then he is not used to that turning around into something bad.

His fingers brush against Stan's wrist to pull Stan's focus back to him, and he finds himself regretting it when Stan's pale eyes finally snap back to him, staring back without warmth.

"No," Stan enunciates very carefully. "I don't suppose you would."

Mike licks his lips, blinks, world turning to black for less than half a second under his eyelids, and when it turns to colors again, Stan is gone. His ears are still ringing with the *pop* of his departure. Standing in front of the library with his arms half raised to grasp someone whose body was replaced by empty space, Mike sighs.

The next time they see each other again, Stan is wearing the striped shirt and a polite but impersonal tug of his lips upwards that is not quite a smile, appearing very much the same as the first time Mike saw him. He apologizes for his erratic behavior of last time, says all the right words about a glitch in his oh-so-tidy system, offers an apology as insincere as it is formal. It's all a lie, of course.

Mike gulps down the knot in his throat and pretends this is fine. He smiles to the right people in the street and talks to Bill Denbrough when he meets him at the coffee shop and this is just fine-

He returns to his new empty apartment that looks so much like his old empty one, and then, when the space is quiet and dimly lit around him, he lets the loneliness curl around him like a needy pet.

This was never, Mike realizes, about finding a home; this was about wanting to leave his behind.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

alright forkers i'm calling it since they're all pretty close already: who do you think is going to figure it

out first? winner gets... the validation of me telling  
them they're right



## 6. maybe she's born with inherent moral virtue, maybe it's Maybelline

### Summary for the Chapter:

So far, if Richie was to rate his couple months of being dead, he would, all in all, give it the generous rating of zero star. He would not recommend the experience to his friends and family. And that is before he finds the note.

### Notes for the Chapter:

me: wow this chapter is taking twice as long as usual to write... i don't understand :((

me: oh it's because it's 20 pages long

ANYWAY so i cut this one in half because it was a thicc boi, so here you have the first ten pages and i'll try to post the other ones next week! i probably won't be here much next weekend so at least it means something will be posted woohoo

PS: a weird amount of this is character meta by psychology lesson. i want to reassure everyone that this will be the only time i let my old philosophy classes take over and that i will never try to make people learn about ethics again in the rest of this fic. thank you

On the blackboard, the big question mark after *Class 7: How to do good?* is mocking Richie. He would usually think of himself as a chill, laid back guy. Most people would. But this question mark... That one is really pissing him off. Laughing at him.

Eddie would tell him he is being unreasonable, but Eddie just spent this morning bothering him about putting on a scarf and taking vitamin supplements C, D, *and* B12 to ward off flu season even though they physically cannot get sick, so he doesn't get to tell him what to think.

Richie is so busy pondering this over he fails to listen to the first five minutes of Mike's monologue because he is so busy focusing on the question mark to notice the syllabus. Which is quite alright, in his opinion - you wouldn't go to a movie and just spoil yourself the entire plot with Wikipedia, would you? Then why should he ruin the surprise of each of these delightful book club meetings with stuff like boring assigned readings? Richie has never gone through the entirety of any of his assigned readings and he did just fine in school. More than fine, actually. He was a decent student with minimal effort. In fact, he is sure after a month of Mike talking ethics to them, he will be more moral than whoever their old dead white mopey German guy of the day is.

Also, Eddie's shoulder pushes against him. It is more like Eddie's entire side, really, a distracting warmth against Richie's. He doesn't know how Eddie expects him to focus when their legs are half tangled out of the loveseat. Sure, they may or may not be the actual soulmates Eddie was promised he would have, but a guy has needs, alright? Richie's love life might not have been all that when he was alive but he was still a man, sharing his bed every night with another body and now, apparently, huddling in tiny couches.

"I guess you could say there are three major questions that drive ethics. They are," Mike, standing in front of them with his muscular arms crossed over his chest, uncrosses them to write on the board as he talks.

Against him Eddie shifts a little, turning away to better look at Mike, the motion somehow dragging his body even further across Richie, one thigh basically on Richie's lap.

For a half-hearted second, Richie wonders where his usual gay freakout is hiding its ugly, misshapen head. But when looking deep inside his own brain, something he usually tried to avoid back on Earth, he finds himself only tired. Maybe that is how other people come to terms with hidden parts of themselves, not out of self-love, but weariness. Maybe Richie is just messed up in more than one way.

He doesn't like this train of thought at all. He has to make a joke, and quick.

“What is Good and how can we determine what is good and what is bad?” Mike goes on: now that he has started talking about Ethics, he has turned from a nervous man shifting his weight between his legs to a more confident version of himself, taken in his speech as if in a high, and everyone’s eyes are riveted on him. “How does one apply that to act in a moral way - so in short, how does one *do* good? And finally, how can we actually apply these main values and rules in everyday life and specific situations?”

Yes. That’s his shot. Richie pipes up, throwing a finger up like the caricature of an overeager middle schooler. “Hey teach, so, not to be a bummer, but these are definitely more than three questions.”

“Beep beep, Richie,” Eddie groans as Stan rolls his eyes, both of them rude, because sure, this Voice wasn’t his best work, but still. In Spider-Man’s words, you can’t expect them *all* to be zingers.

“Go on Mike,” Stan says, smiling, but subdued, nothing of that sweet grin he usually saves for Mike. So far, no one else seems to have noticed. To be fair, no one else is neurotically staring at the other residents in fear they will figure out that they don’t belong, but still, Richie doesn’t quite know what to do with this information.

Mike clears his throat, a bit thrown out of sorts, which sort of makes Richie feel guilty. Usually, Richie would repress that shit, but considering the circumstances...

“Yeah, sorry Mikey, don’t mind me,” Richie tries. “Just being a jealous husband because I’m pretty sure Eds has a dream that starts like that,” he still adds in what was supposed to be his low voice and is still a couple of decibels louder than a whisper, urging an annoyed Eddie to punch his arm with a *dude, not cool*. He doesn’t move away from the loveseat, though, the punch only digging him deeper into Richie’s side, so Richie counts this as a win.

He counts his losses and throws an arm around Eddie’s midsection, hoping the other man’s shoulder isn’t resonating with Richie’s heavy heartbeat like he feels he is doing. On the other couch, Bev quirks her eyebrows at him, playful, and he pulls a face back. She is the one closest to him in the room, literally, apart from Eddie nudged against him, of course. They came in chattering about music - her taste in

bands either amazing or abysmal, nothing in-between, but her wit sharp enough to make up for it. He really likes Beverly, even if she spends a lot of time seemingly either caught up in her own shit or pretending very hard not to be. Today she is sitting with socked feet on Ben's lap, who rests his free hand on her exposed calve, thumb running reverent circles into her milky white skin as if he couldn't quite believe his luck.

Relax, dude. It's just a freaking *foot*. If Richie shoved his holed socks onto Eddie's lap, he would probably kick him off entirely - actually the other day, when they were both laying together, Eddie kicked his glasses right off, the little asshole. He is only acting all sweet right now because the others are around and, as Eddie reminded him most unhelpfully before they walked in, they needed to act in love.

Ah. Act in love. Fuck's sake. Richie holds back a groan, closes his eyes, tilts his head backward on the couch.

"Focus, airhead," Eddie whispers, poking him until he zones back into reality. His breath is warm against Richie's jawline and he can feel his hair stand up on the scruff of his neck.

This is what they don't tell you in the old, dusty, centuries-old and ages wiser philosophy books they were all assigned: being in love with your fake soulmate *sucks*.

"Basically," Mike carries on, "we're just asking ourselves: what is good, how do we do good, and how can I apply that every day? Which is all the more interesting now, since everyone in that room obviously did apply that every day, consciously or not. Can any one of you answer the question: *how* did you do good?"

A beat. Mike starts to fret, and Richie himself gets nervous no one is going to answer the poor guy, which would be all sorts of awkward, when Bill, sitting on the ground with his head comfortably pushed against Beverly's hip, pipes up. "I know it's p-pretty dumb, but just... Doing the right thing, I guess?"

"Alright!" Mike says, relief obvious in the way his shoulders sag. "But how do you know what's right?"

"Fuck if I know," Bill shrugs, which is relatable, but he still smiles and adds, trying to be helpful: "I guess you can sort of feel it, in most cases. If something feels right or, wuh-well, wrong. I don't know."

"No, it's great!" Mike encourages. "This is pretty much what virtue ethics are about. Basically, doing the right thing is the result of something that's already part of a person's character, inherently. There are lots of questions about that, like do you learn that part of your character or are you born with it."

"Maybe she's born with inherent moral virtue, maybe it's Maybelline," Richie mutters before yelping due to the sharp nudge of Eddie's elbow. Bev and Eddie still chuckle, though.

"- as a part of human nature, if everyone has that in equal proportions, et cetera, but we'll see that when we study Plato and Aristotle. Does anyone else have an opinion?"

Bev hesitates but says: "I think feeling right isn't always enough. You have to consider what's best for everyone around you, you know? How what you do impact the world around you." Mike nods in what he hopes is an encouraging way and she keeps going. "Like, for instance, I'd like a cigarette right now, but if I had one, I would literally smoke out everyone in the room, so I don't, because I'm not a jerk."

Also relatable.

"That's great!" Mike says. "Not that you can't have cigarettes. I'm sorry. But yeah- that's basically consequentialism, that whether an action is good or not depends on its outcome, and also utilitarianism: putting the needs of the many above the few. Then again there are other questions to raise, since it can justify a lot of things: killing a murderer on a spree keeps people safe but it means we accept murder as something that can be good. Where do we draw the line?"

"I feel like," Ben tries, "it depends on trying to put yourself in the shoes of people around you? Trying to make them happy, genuinely caring about them, and not just..." he trails off, and doesn't add anything, sheepish.

“Yeah! That’s ethics of care. Based on empathy, compassion, relationships.” Richie lets himself breathe, because things are looking up this time, but of course, this is screaming victory way too soon, because Mike turns to him and Eddie and asks: “What do you think, guys?”

Eddie freezes against him. Richie exhales, slowly, against him, and pushes his knee against his, trying to reassure him but not wanting to step over whatever boundaries he has. After a second, Eddie inhales again, matching him.

“Well, in the words of our good friend Billiam,” Richie jokes to alleviate the sudden tension only Eddie and Richie can feel, “fuck if I know, my dude. I came here so you’d tell me, didn’t I?”

So far, if Richie was to rate his couple months of being dead, he would, all in all, give it the generous rating of zero star. He would not recommend the experience to his friends and family. And that is *before* he finds the note.

Standing next to Mike, Eddie is distracted, talking casually about something Richie can’t quite hear but imagines goes along the way of the script he makes in his head:

*EDDIE: Mikey, your beautiful arms are so muscular under your dork sweaters and plaid shirts and you always smell good even when picking up rotten shrimp for Stan the Man, how do you do that?*

*MIKE: Well Eddie, I am a good guy with his life put together who totally deserves to be here, so I have a skincare routine. Want me to show you?*

*EDDIE: That is literally the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard. Do you know who doesn’t have a skincare routine?*

*MIKE: Who?*

*EDDIE: Richie.*

*MIKE: Who?*

And then, in about five minutes, they kiss and elope together. Or something a little less dramatic and that makes Richie sound a little less crazy.

To be fair, it's his fault, really: he abandoned the loveseat for a cigarette with Bev at the end of today's still-ever-so-stressful lesson, one that had been unusually quiet and contemplative. Neither of them was feeling much like talking. But neither of them was all that good at silence either. Quickly they wound up asking Stan to materialize a record player for them that is now, at risk of falling at every other gush of wind, balanced precariously at the edge of the library's - and, by extension, Mike's flat's - fire escape, the steps of which they were sitting on. Richie refused to let Bev pick the song without having a right of veto, lest they end up listening to New Kids on the Block or, god forbid, ABBA. There are only so many nineties' industrial pop groups one can tolerate on behalf of his blooming friendship before he loses his rock'n'roll street cred. They found a middle ground with The Cure's *Disintegration* - objectively their best album in Richie's very unbiased, impartial opinion which is not in any way related to the fact that when it came out he biked to the town center to buy it and it officially became his first album ever. It is also, incidentally, an excellent soundtrack to moping and chain smoking as they pretend not to notice everyone clearing up in the next room.

Ben came to tell her he and Bill were leaving in a couple minutes right as the track jumped from *Closedown* to *Lovesong*, which was a bummer, but which Richie took in stride like a champ. By which he means he only whined for half a minute as they finished their cigarettes and extinguish the stubs on the ashtray Mike keeps for them.

"What are you on about?" Bill asks, smiling.

"Your disrespect for the masterpieces of modern music," Richie says.

"*Modern music*," Bev mimics. "That record is almost thirty-year-old, grandpa."

“And it still delivers! They’re still touring. These guys are maniacs, Bev, and *you* have no taste.”

“What? Bev’s music is great,” Ben protests.

“Yeah, case in point: you listen to Backstreet Boys,” Richie starts as he picks up his coffee cup in the hope that there is still some liquid glory inside it, bringing it up to his lips, “which is just insulting to-”

But he never finishes explaining why the Backstreet Boys are an insult, perhaps unnecessarily as he likes to believe this is pretty self-explanatory, even to them, because instead of bitter cold coffee, his lips only touch the smooth and warm surface of paper. He frowns at his cup. The others pick up the discussions seamlessly. He plucks the paper between nervous fingers, unravels it. He can feel his eyes widening and his brain boggling. For a second, he cannot breathe. Then he remembers anyone could see him. Get curious. Ask questions he doesn’t want to answer.

He folds the paper about and stick it in his pocket clumsily.

“Are you alright, m-man?” Bill asks, not unkindly, for what is probably not the first time as his hand connects with his shoulder.

“Everything is fine!” Richie replies automatically.

“You’re a little puh-pale.”

Richie doesn’t look at him. If he looks at him his lie is blown. Instead he says: “Seasick, my man.”

“Seasick?”

Richie grins. “Lost in the ocean of your eyes, m’lord.”

Then he makes kissing noises as Bill acts like a shy blushing maiden and Ben and Bev roll their eyes at them. It’s all it takes to reassure him that Richie is alright.

It’s all an act, of course.



They do what Richie always does when he is afraid: they go for drinks.

“Hi stranger,” Bev tells him sometimes after their fourth beer but before their second shot. She is smiling around a cigarette dangling in her mouth and pointing her thumb towards the door. “Wanna get out of here?”

“Oh shit, are you trying to get into my pants, Mrs Marsh? Fucking *finally*,” Richie exclaims.

He slides off his seat under Eddie’s disapproving stare - they have been smoking more and more recently, as the tension piled up, and Eddie hates the smell. Ignoring the party pooper he grabs Bev’s hand in his, makes her twirl a little, and she tries to twirl him, cigarette forgotten for a second, both laughing a bit hysterically. She is pretty drunk already, even more so than him, all the carefree and manic she barely lets through bouncing off her every step.

“Richie-” Eddie starts.

“Shhh, not now, honey, we’re eloping.”

“Richie,” Eddie continues, calm, which is never a good sign. “It’s pretty late, I think it’s time for us to go home.”

“*You* go home,” Richie protests. “I’m staying here with my mistress. I’m just going to sleep on the couch anyway.”

“Trouble in paradise?” Bev gets out before she falls over giggling. Richie’s grin widens before it fades, and he eyes Bev suspiciously, her too-wide smile, crinkled eyes, red hair in a ponytail swooshing as she moves. Suddenly he sees, with a clarity he didn’t have before, he wouldn’t have sober, how fake her bubbly cheer is.

He doesn’t know anything about Beverly, he realizes, other than she’s a fashion designer who likes terrible old pop music and once got drunk and stayed in a stranger’s house garden with a dog for the entire duration of a party, eleven p.m. to four a.m., before figuring out it wasn’t even the host’s dog, nor his garden. Always she asks questions, diverts, recounts anecdotes, acts so genuinely interested in

what others are saying, no matter what it is, until she has to run home without having said anything of significance about herself.

It dawns on Richie that she may very well be the one who left him the note. Any one of them could be. Maybe not Eddie - for a hot second he lets his brain run with the idea, of Eddie's resentment growing roots so deep and ugly he turns to this to punish him, but that's not Eddie, he would never. He would yell at him until his lungs are sore, maybe, but not try to freak him out. Anyone else, though... Richie would trust them, almost, sort of, but they *could*, even kind-hearted Mike, even gentle Ben, even friendly Bev -, even everyone else, Bill, Stan. They are the only ones who were in the room that day.

"Richie?" Bev asks, fingers brushing against his shoulder but not quite touching - Bev isn't a very tactile person either.

"Yeah, I think I'm going to get another drink, my treat," Richie says. "Actually, you know what? I'm getting shots. Andamos, bitchados!"

And so, just like that, it's over. Richie knows it is.

Above them, the night sky is as clear and empty as Richie's head, and the air smells like nothing at all, not even a whiff of Eddie's cologne. Or maybe it does. Maybe it's just that the only thing Richie can feel is the smooth fold of the balled up paper sheet in his jean pocket. The walk home comes and goes in a daze of nodding to whatever Eddie is telling him and trying to crack jokes at opportune times. In his stupefied mind he is doing great at keeping up the pretense until they get to the house and Eddie confronts him, tries to get him to talk about whatever is wrong, and Richie realizes that for a man who has been in the closet for most of his life, he is pretty fucking terrible at lying.

Even the fight that ensues unravels as if Richie wasn't quite here, distant and removed as if watching through a television screen, which seems to worry Eddie more than anything Richie could have done. Yet Richie can't quite bring himself to care. In his head the words run over and over again, sickeningly familiar in a distant,

foreign way, and it leaves a sour taste in his mouth, a taste like hungover mornings, a taste he takes too long to realize is bile before he is throwing up into the toilet bowl.

“Are you alright?” Eddie says behind him, voice soft and vulnerable as his socked feet thump on the bathroom floor until he is kneeling next to Richie. Cool fingers brush back his hair, keeping it from straying in front of his face, soothing him. Richie thinks of Eddie Kaspbrak, five-point seven feet tall, hypochondriac extraordinaire, brushing his hair away from his face as he pukes, and he sort of wants to sob.

“Peachy,” he says instead, trembling fingers wiping at his eyes and ending up bumping against his cheekbone, missing. Eddie mercifully doesn’t comment on it. “I think Stan is trying to poison me, though—you may need to keep an eye out for bird shirts when you cross the street.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Eddie says, unnaturally soft where he would usually roll his eyes. “Come on, let’s take this back to the bed, okay? It has got to be more comfortable than the toilet floor.”

“*Au contraire, mon ami*,” Richie says while letting Eddie tug him up, pretending his voice isn’t shaking: “I’ve finally found where I belong.”

“Hilarious. Also, you’ve mispronounced every single French word in this sentence.”

“But you knew it was French,” Richie points out, raising one finger and then letting his arm drop, suddenly too tired suddenly to care.

He doesn’t mind when Eddie puts his palm on his chest, gentle, and pushes him a little until he sits down on the bed. In the moonlight, Eddie’s face is younger somehow, and even his frown becomes kind, his dark eyes wide and worried and inside them a distorted reflection of the moon.

If Richie’s mouth didn’t still taste like vomit and toothpaste he might have kissed him.

Instead, he lets him crouch down on his knees without making a single joke about it and untie his sneakers in careful motions - was Richie wearing shoes in the bedroom, and Eddie not complaining about it like he didn't do the same thing every time they left the library late? He must be really worried then.

"There, you sleep now," Eddie says, standing back up and guiding Richie's face into the pillow with the tips of his fingers in an awkward manner. "Get yelled at tomorrow."

"Gee, you really know how to talk a guy into bed," Richie says around his furred tongue, half asleep already before he sits back up. "Wait- I can't sleep on the *bed*."

"What the fuck is wrong with the bed?"

"No, I mean," Richie corrects because Eddie seems really insulted on behalf of their bed, "*I* can't sleep on the bed. I'm not going to make you sleep on the futon just because I got- I'm a- I'm a fuckup, no, yeah, that's not gonna happen."

Eddie sighs. "I don't care."

"You *do*. You said- you had scoliosis as a kid and your back was very sensitive to things like shitty rock hard mattress-"

"You're a shitty rock hard mattress," Eddie grumbles nonsensically, and Richie laughs, a bit hysterical, as if he pulled off a good one. "Listen, it won't kill me for one night. I just said that because I wanted the bed anyway."

But in his drunken sleepy daze, it seems like the worst insult possible to make Eddie sleep on the couch, so Richie shakes his head with meaning.

"Richie, you're so goddamn annoying, just take the fucking bed."

Richie has to stop shaking his head because it makes his vision swims, which is *not* a good idea for him right now, so instead, he says: "No way, José."

"Oh my f-" Eddie interrupts himself to throw his arms in the air:

“Alright, you know what? You win.”

For a second Richie considers how to get up in his impediment, which seems like it will involve the help of one Eddie and Ben and maybe two or three cranes, but Eddie just shimmies off his godawful khakis and into the covers next to him. The bed is a two-person but not very wide, certainly too small for them to sleep without touching unless they stay on the very edge of their sides, so Eddie’s thigh brushes against Richie’s and he can count the newborn wrinkles between his eyebrows. He can’t breathe, and it seems like Eddie can’t either from his still shoulders and startled face. Even if he’s the one who got into the bed in the first fucking place.

He breaks out of it and rolls on his other side, not facing him anymore but his shoulders still in contact with Richie’s torso, his feet hovering next to his knees, a line of contact like electric wire between them. “Good night, Richie.”

Richie wouldn’t expect to fall asleep so easily if alcohol wasn’t involved. All he can think about as he spirals into sleep is not Eddie’s body against his but the words *I know your secret* scribbled inside his left pocket.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

xoxo gossip girl

## 7. your mouth still tastes like shrimp

### Summary for the Chapter:

“I want to die,” Richie says, surprised to find it comes off muffled and incomprehensible. Upon further inspection, also known as halfway opening a bleary eye, it is because he is mouthing off against a hill of warm skin that smells of girly strawberry soap and cologne and sleep.

Unsurprisingly, it’s Eddie.

“Shut the fuck up,” Eddie mumbles.

### Notes for the Chapter:

if i write "bed sharing" in the tags you KNOW i'm going to go full "and there was only one bed" trope

also full disclosure: i have people coming over for the next two weekends so i don't know when i'll be able to sit down and write again, so this may be the start of a semi-hiatus?? and i'll come back mid december?? or maybe not and i'll be able to post next week?? who the fuck knows. not me that's who

The only good thing about hangovers is that while one is busy groaning in fetal position begging for aspirin, one cannot ponder over the ominous note left in their pocket, for one cannot ponder over anything at all besides a strong urge to die.

Ugh, all this formal thinking is giving him a headache.

“I want to die,” Richie says, surprised to find it comes off muffled and incomprehensible. Upon further inspection, also known as halfway opening a bleary eye, it is because he is mouthing off against a hill of warm skin that smells of girly strawberry soap and cologne and sleep.

Unsurprisingly, it’s Eddie.

“Shut the fuck up,” Eddie mumbles, somehow very loud from

somewhere near Richie's right ear, and the body against him stirs a little but does not move from his position atop Richie.

The skin Richie was mouthing off against turns out to be the hollow of Eddie's neck. With Eddie's face tucked into his hair, Richie can hear every breath he takes and feel the rumble of his words. There is a leg straddling his belly and another one tangled between his, and Eddie's arm is strewn across his torso, hands tightening a little around his biceps as he comes awake, muscles stretching slowly like a sleepy cat.

If it weren't for the raging migraine and disgusting taste in his mouth right now, this would be the highlight of his week, nay, his *month*.

"Aw, Eds, you do love me after all," Richie coos, and immediately regrets it, wincing at himself.

"Shut the fuck up," Eddie repeats, then: "How are you feeling?"

Richie shrugs under his weight - surprised Eddie hasn't scrambled off him yet - then realizes the other man can't see it. "Like shit."

"Yeah, well, you deserve it," Eddie says, finally getting off and out of the bed, taking the covers with him, the jerk. He walks away with the blanket wrapped around his shoulder like a cape, confident in the knowledge that Richie is physically unable to howl to the death the way he usually would, what with his splitting headache. God, even his stomach hurts, as if it was battery acid and not alcohol he drank last night.

In spite of this, he falls back into sleep as easily as into an old friend's arms, fading in and out of consciousness until a dip in the mattress close to his thigh wakes him up again. Eddie, sitting on the bed with a glass of water in one hand and aspirin in the other, nudges him gently.

"My hero, my savior, my actual guardian angel," Richie says as he stands up a little, accepting gladly what Eddie offers, their hands brushing off and on. "God, I thought there were no hangovers in here. I feel cheated. This is a fraud. I was lied to."

As he says it and gulps down the white pill, his headache slowly but surely lifts in a way that shouldn't be natural and is clearly not. He is not complaining, though.

"With what you drank last night I would be surprised you were still alive in real life," Eddie notes.

"Aw, Eds, did you mourn me? Did you cry on my tomb and throw yourself at my grave saying no, cruel gods, it should have been me--"

"Yeah, yeah, I was inconsolable. Please go brush your teeth, you stink."

"How rude to say that to a man on the verge of death," Richie jokes.

When he stumbles off the bed, he smacks a loud kiss on Eddie's cheek as the latter makes a disgusted noise and rubs it out.

As long as he is in the bathroom, he might as well shower, and so he does, a quick and botched job that only leads to him putting back on the same wrinkled plaid shirt over an equally wrinkled T-shirt. On the T-shirt is printed a poop emoji in a Christmas hat that Eddie called obnoxious and even Ben had nothing nice to say about. He comes out of it just as pathetic but significantly less disgusting and sweaty. He brushes his teeth thoroughly in the hope that it will wash out the bad taste entirely, even puts on some of Eddie's strawberry-scented face cream - here is where his smell came from - crinkling his eyes so as not to get any inside before opening them again and staring at his own face, naked without glasses. His skin is slightly blotchy after a scalding hot shower and he looks tired, vaguely guilty, but otherwise almost alright.

*I know your secret.*

He digs into his jeans on the floor and takes the paper out, then slips it into the chest pocket of his shirt. He will have to tell Eddie. He knows he will. He doesn't know how he even considered not doing so, when he wouldn't even have made it this far without him, really. Possibly even would have given up. That sounds like something Richie would do.



He doesn't have to figure it out, though, because Eddie is here. Walking him home drunk, sleeping on top of him, letting their dog out, showing him his philosophy notes on their readings, carrying their milkshakes. Complaining all the while, but doing so anyway.

*I know your secret.* If Richie didn't know better, if he didn't spend most of his days scared shitless, scared and insecure and guilty - if it was another universe he would think he was in love.

So he knows he has to tell him about the note. He couldn't hide it for long if he tried, anyway. That's a nonquestion. They're in it together. *It just happens to suck.*

Yet when he comes back to bed, Eddie is curled up under the blanket again, hogging it entirely like the selfish prick he is, a tuft of dark hair poking out from under it, then two sleepy eyes, the straight line of his nose, a slack-jawed face with a beginning of dark stubble, his mouth moving: "Either go back to bed or cook breakfast but don't stare at me when I sleep, man, it's creepy."

Richie's heart flutters painfully. He knows it is oh-so-selfish of him, to grab at a hint of something he doesn't have nor deserves having, but let's face it, the afterlife sucks, his life wasn't much better, and for now, all he wants is to be as close to Eddie as he will let him.

Worrying him more is for another day, Richie decides as he slips back into bed and tugs the cover violently to himself.

"Do you think he knows?" Eddie asks for what Richie could swear is the hundredth time as he fusses over Richie's clothes.

Which is stupid, because Richie wears the exact same thing he always wears, a T-shirt with a dumb logo and a Hawaiian shirt over it, in spite of Eddie's insistence to change. It would just have been suspicious, in Richie's opinion: telling Eddie so would mean depriving himself of the reassuring flutter of hands over his sides, though.

(Richie knows about the intricateness of his own rituals, alright.)

"Let's see. Do *I* think that if the Architect of this entire neighborhood,

an all-powerful being who has absolute control over everything and everyone, knew that I was, you know, smuggling into the good place, he'd do something petty like send me a creepy passive-aggressive note and then ask me over for tea?" Richie says, mocking, as if he hadn't been freaking out in the exact same way Eddie is now barely five minutes ago. They are taking turns freaking out now. One of them breaks down and the other puts on his big boy pants to comfort him. It's a weird dynamic, but it works for them.

"What do you mean, creepy passive-aggressive note?"

Richie pauses. "What?"

Eddie steps slightly away from him, his hands leaving Richie to fidget with the book that was laying down on their coffee table. "You said, quote-unquote, creepy passive-aggressive note."

"Aw, Eds, you listen to me when I speak? That's soft."

"What the fuck, of course I listen to you when you speak," Eddie protests, seeming annoyed and looking down at the back of the book cover. "I'm a good fucking soulmate."

"No you're not," Richie says, pausing for drama, before adding while ruffling Eddie's hair and bending a little towards him: "you're the best soulmate."

Eddie looks up, puzzled and innocent. "Sorry, did you say something? Yeah, because I was so busy reading that book, you see-"

Richie's laughter bubbles up his throat and for a second he forgets about the impending doom before it comes crashing back onto him as he walks off towards the Architect's office, Eddie flipping him off behind him.

Not much else seems to lift the anxiety off these days. Richie still has no idea who wrote the note, in spite of his best efforts. Only now the Architect wants to speak to him for some weird unfathomable reason, which means they're almost definitely fucked, because Richie can't lie for shit. Eddie can, surprisingly, but not Richie.

Hence his position now, sitting rigidly in the chair facing the

Architect's desk.

"Are you alright, Richie?" he asks, his high-pitched voice almost singsonging his name. "You look a little tense here."

Richie wants to throw up and run away. "I'm fine."

Stan, who is standing by the door, not quite hovering but not far from it either, tells him: "If you need to puke, *please* do it in the basket next to you. That I brought here *specifically* for you. And call me if you need anything. Unless you're already puking."

Which explains the worried tiptoeing around Richie ever since he came in. Good to know he looks that terrible and these are the guy's priorities. God forbid anyone stains the silvery carpet, of course. "That's too thoughtful, Stan," Richie says.

The Architect hums pensively. "In any case, Stan, could you please leave us alone?"

For a second Stan very much looks like he wants to argue, potentially to physically throw himself at Richie and angle him in the direction of the bin in case of sickness. But he doesn't. For all his annoyance, Richie sort of wishes he had.

Stan might be a weird little robot man, but he is, as much as one can be, Richie's friend.

He closes the door gently, and it's back to silence again, a drawn-out pause that makes Richie want to itch out of his own body. God, he hates silence. It is like toying with his food in the middle of an empty cafeteria table at school all over again.

"Soooo," Richie starts, drawing the word out as long as possible before it becomes unbearably awkward, "how come Handsome Hanscom isn't doing this little rendezvous thingie, then? Isn't that his job?"

"Oh of course!" The Architect exclaims. "It would usually be Ben's job, sure. Thing is, I thought you might benefit from a more, uh, one-on-one approach. Plus, well, we don't want to put dear old Ben in an awkward situation, do we?"

If Richie starts sweating anymore, it will be his entire T-shirt (today's flavor of choice is the text *I GOT WORMS. SPECIALIZING IN WORMS FARM!* written in letters shaped like worms, which was in hindsight a bad choice) that will stick to his skin in a cold moist fabric sensation, rather than just the back. He imagines there must be a quite ugly sweaty patch hidden by his jean jacket.

"Do we?" he tries, voice wobbly.

That's it. He's going to get sent to hell without even going through his entire list of Eddie nicknames. He can see his entire life flashing before his eyes in a way it didn't back when he was in the car accident. The Architect definitely knows, and he's going to kick him out, and he's going to be tortured for eternity and never see Eddie again, or Bev or Bill or any of the others, and his toes will be eaten by worm-leeches in memory of his idiotic fucking T-shirt.

"The thing is, Rich," the Architect says, and god does he need to put that many drawn-out pauses in his sentences? "I don't think you are quite," he leans forward on his elbows and suddenly Richie absolutely has to look at his face rather than, you know, anywhere else, "at *home* here," oh fuck oh fuck, "in the good place," oh FUCK, "with everyone else. Because see, the thing is, Rich, you don't look very happy."

In the middle of having a panic attack and trying very hard to look like he is not having a panic attack, Richie can only say: "Uh?"

To be fair, although his answer might not be the most intelligent, considering that he can't breathe without wheezing right now, he feels like it is kind of impressive.

"You don't look very happy, Richie," the Architect repeats, pouting. "Just look at you right now. The frown on your face. The hiding under oversized plaid shirts. The *hair*. Just yesterday I heard you were sick at home."

"I was hungover," Richie defends feebly.

The Architect waves him off with a long, pale hand. "Come on, there's no such things as hangovers in here, Richie. Do you really

think you are living your best afterlife?”

“No, hey, I definitely am!” Richie tries, which would be more convincing if his voice didn’t break halfway through every word. “This is my happy face, promise! I’m just- yeah, so happy. I love the, uh, vegan milkshakes. And clown decorations. Also Belze- our dog. Tiny little thing. Cute. Oh, and Eddie! Also tiny cute little thing. Yeah, love it.”

The Architect *actually* pouts at that. “But do you though? You don’t have to lie to me, Richie,” *HA FUCKING HA*, Richie’s mind screams, “I can see your relationship with Eddie is not... Optimal. Everyone can see it! And these, uh, philosophy book clubs-” fuck- “oh, you didn’t think I didn’t notice those, did you? You don’t have to pretend to be someone you’re not for people, Richie.” The irony of the situation is so funny it’s plain sad. “Our soulmate system is a 99,9999-” Richie waits patiently until he finishes his enumeration -”9% sure deal, but nothing is infallible. Maybe, if you and your soulmate don’t feel like you belong together-”

“Oh, we do,” Richie barks, voice suddenly steady. Because it’s true. Richie is terrible at lying, but saying he feels like he belongs with Eddie... Saying he makes him feel at home with his dozens of vitamins stashed in cupboards and his terrible habit to leave dishes in the sink because he’s used to having a dishwasher and his dumb loafers on the couch... That’s not too hard to spit out.

(Unless he were to tell it to Eddie, though, but the mere idea is laughable. Richie gets off a Good One!)

“Of course you do,” the Architect says too quickly. “Of course you do. Have you talked about it?”

No, they have not. But it’s alright, Richie decides as the Architect himself is blabbering innocuously about what Richie can try to fit in better in the neighborhood and group activities that sound like something Richie would rather rip his eyeballs out than do, like canoeing or joining the bird choir. After all, Eddie has been weirdly softer with him these days, what with the sleeping in the same bed (which they do not talk about either, ever) for a few days now, not hiding his laughter at Richie’s jokes as much, and generally being

more relaxed. They get along. They do. It's still Eddie, so of course he has to complain about every single thing Richie does and yell a lot. But they're alright. Aren't they?

(And another thought, even more awful, so much Richie can't quite spell it out, even to himself: Eddie was there in that room when the paper was slipped under his cup, wasn't he?)

When it happens, Richie almost doesn't notice at first. To be fair, Richie hasn't been noticing much these days, buzzing with the anxiety of not knowing who knows his secret and the awkwardness that always surrounds him around Eddie now, trying to hide his stupid crush and not be so cumbersome all the time, then remembering he is not supposed to change who he is for anyone and falling back into old patterns. Strangely, Eddie seems weirded out, but not too bothered. He has been acting differently about Richie too, even if Richie cannot quite put a finger on it.

In the meantime, Richie avoids hanging out with the group as much as possible outside of classes, because he can't look at them in the face without suspicion and fear and bile rising up his throat, so they are alone a lot. Richie sort of misses the others. He doesn't talk about it. There is nothing he could do anyway. He is no Nancy fucking Drew. It doesn't keep him from spiraling inside his own head.

"Do you want to go get dinner tomorrow?" Eddie asks while they're hanging out in bed reading, like a couple of elderly married people who wear plaid shirts to sleep and need Viagra to have a sex life. Eddie actually has reading glasses, the loser, with thin silvery frames that he keeps pushing up the bridge of his nose out of a lack of habit. He looks like a hot grandpa. It is not doing wonders for Richie's self-restraint, or his concentration span, but luckily, reading philosophy treatises is somewhat of a boner-killer. Somehow he's so frustrated by that fucking book it's helping distract him from Eddie.

Due to sheer peer pressure, Richie is actually studying what they were assigned for once, which turns out to be, to everyone's surprise (no), a dead German guy. He can't quite make out the point inside the drawn-out paragraphs and, in spite of his best efforts, his eyelids

shutter closed more often than not, scrambling the words in a mess of half-sentences - *the true incentive which underlies all acts of real moral worth... I shall actually prove that it is the only possible one... Conduct in the first case is necessarily egoistic, as it is impelled by an interested motive...*

"Sure," Richie says instead of pointing out that, because they live in the same house, they always eat together anyway. It's weird that Eddie is now deciding to be all shy about it. "Pizza place?"

"I was thinking we could go somewhere a bit fancier this time around?"

Still frowning at his book, finally Richie underlines:

*It is this Compassion alone which is the real basis of all voluntary justice and all genuine loving-kindness. Only so far as an action springs therefrom, has it moral value; and all conduct that proceeds from any other motive whatever has none*

"Uh, sorry, sure! Why not," he says, scratching the back of his neck, elbow brushing against Eddie's. If he manages to get through this chapter, it will definitely be cause for celebration anyway.

"And then," Eddie goes on ranting, cheeks and nose pink-red under his scarf as Richie holds the door open for him with a mock curtsy, "the fucker starts writing in French, of all things? Jack Rousseau or whatever - I'm going to *feed* this *fucking* book to Ameripaw, I swear to god. I'll use it to play fetch."

"I thought Ameripaw was, quote-unquote, the dumbest dog name you ever heard and there was no way you were letting me call it that, Rich, that's animal abuse?" Richie says, amused, after telling Eddie's name to the waiter while who takes off their coats and leads them to their reserved table, a tiny round one in a corner near the window, candlelit and cozy.

It is a proof of how far Richie has come in dealing with his own idiot mind that he lets himself think it's a perfect spot for a date with only

a slight, familiar churn of his stomach.

"This is so not the topic of conversation right now, Richie," he likes how Eddie says his name, even if it's the same as every single other person who has talked about him ever. "We're complaining about Schopenhauer. I'll complain about you later."

"All I'm hearing is you're ready to call our dog Ameripaw," Richie notes but doesn't add more as Eddie pulls his chair for him.

"I'm ready to call you an asshole, too," Eddie grumbles, smiling with his chin tucked a little towards his neck like he's reluctant to do so.

Richie puts his elbows on the table and leans towards him, fluttering eyelashes under the candlelight. "Yes, but I'm *your* asshole, Spaghetti-man. Don't ever forget it. We have a dog together. We're basically gay-married already."

Inwardly he winces. Great way to remind Eddie he's stuck with a loser of a soulmate, dumbass. As if it wasn't enough that they woke up with Richie's morning wood - a perfectly biological reaction showing his blood pressure is doing wonders for a man his age, thank you very much - pressed against Eddie's thigh, and fuck, wasn't that just *mortifying*. For Richie, anyway. He had apologized what felt like a million times while practically moonwalking into the bathroom, tripping on some weird clown figurines on the way there. Eddie, pleasantly dazed from being half-asleep still, had just blinked at him a lot, eyes on his junk, mouth parted in surprise, and wow, wasn't Richie feeling like the worst person ever, taking advantage of the situation like that.

Tonight, he decides, he will be back to the couch.

On the other side of the table, Eddie too is silent, probably remembering the exact same thing. It's awkward. Richie isn't used to moments spent with Eddie being awkward. He doesn't like it one bit.

"Anyway!" Eddie says, voice high.

"Yeah!"

"We should have wine!"



“Yeah! You know what? Let’s do shots!”

“Uh-” Eddie hesitates for a second- “sure, why not!”

Which is how they set up a series of events that winds up with arm wrestling on the table sometime after the first course and setting fire to their tablecloth. They apologize a thousand times. Or rather Richie does, while Eddie, who was a feral child raised by wolves and only has a vague idea of what human conventions are like when you are in the wrong, accuses the manager of leaving out a fire hazard in the middle of the restaurant, then, turning on Richie when he tries to smooth things down, blames *Richie* for that dumb decision as if it wasn’t his idea in the first place.

Understandingly, they are kicked out of the restaurant and banned forever.

They take a few steps outside before they stop, look at each other, and crack up. They are shaking so badly with laughter they have to sit down on the curve of the street, Eddie pressed under his shoulder, trying and failing to catch his breath.

“Hey, man, dude, do you want,” Richie tries to get out, sobering out a little, “do you want your inhaler or something?”

Wordlessly, Eddie shakes his head, still giggling. Sobering up, as it turns out, is a bad idea. Now Richie is looking at Eddie - really looking at him, his face under streetlights, cheeks pink, skin washed out in golden light. That’s the thing about Eddie. He is a grown man who giggles. Somehow, more than incredibly cute, this is also incredibly attractive to Richie. It doesn’t make sense to him either. He just wants to smash their mouths together and feel Eddie’s giggle against his lips.

That must be obvious in the way he looks at him because suddenly Eddie stops laughing, and he’s looking back, under his eyelashes, definitely at his lips, slow smile, hands neatly folded on Richie’s lap, nose almost brushing against his cheek.

Some remote part of Richie’s brain is screaming, asking for a lockdown, because this is stupid, this is so stupid, and Eddie doesn’t

like him like that, why would he, he's lonely and confused, but so is Richie, lonely and confused and in love, so where would the harm be?

In the end, it's Eddie who makes the move. It's so easy. He just has to slide a little closer, and their lips fit, Eddie instantly sighing against him, fingers digging into his shoulders. Richie can't quite believe it at first, and his entire body is trembling, working overdrive to understand how they got here, running himself into a fever, brain spouting a thousand words by the second and none of them making sense until Richie shuts it down entirely, brings his hands up to Eddie's face, holds it, reverent. His heart is beating embarrassingly fast against his ribcage, ready to make a break for it. His throat is tight. Eddie's mouth moves lazily against his.

It's amazing. Richie has never been very fond of kissing, always thought it was the mediocre attraction before the main event, but now, after more than thirty years, he *gets it*. He wants to be doing this all night. Kissing Eddie, watching the way he unravels against him, sliding his hands from his cheeks to his hair.

Paper burning through his shirt pocket.

Richie remembers, and lets go.

"Hey," Eddie says after a short moment of quiet. "So."

"Pretty good kiss," Richie tries, light and breathless. "My expert opinion is. An eight out of ten."

Eddie smacks him. "What?"

"What?"

"This was so not an eight, asshole!"

"Well, I don't know, Eds, I mean your mouth still tastes a little like shrimp-

"Fuck you!" Eddie half-shouts, but he's laughing.

"Hey, you're moving awfully fast here for me, Eddiekins, I'm a lady-

“That’s not what your mother said,” Eddie challenges, and in front of such a terrible your mom joke Richie can only crack up.

He doesn’t think about the paper. He refuses to. He knows it’s not Eddie, anyway, just knows that, and that’s all that matters, isn’t it?

So instead, Richie asks him if he wants to get ice cream, and they walk home like that, licking their vanilla (Eddie, boring douchebag) and mango cones, Richie running after Eddie to steal more of his, Eddie ducking and shrieking that he shouldn’t have picked mango then like a teenager, then swapping their cones anyway. They walk home like that.

Then, when they are there, Eddie’s hands clumsy on his skin, hurried, hungry, not enough - Richie wants to tell him to stop and take it slow, to take a step back and let Richie fall on his knees, unhurried, worshipful - but Richie thinks of telling him let’s take this slow, or something even more ridiculous and vulnerable maybe, and scoffs it away.

Then-

Then the dog is crying at their feet. She’s biting Richie’s exposed calves, and she wants to pee, and she already did most of it on their living room floor. Which is *not* what good dogs are supposed to do. Eddie laughs against Richie’s neck before he tells him to take out the dog while he takes care of it.

Eddie proceeds to complain about it all the while. Richie doesn’t bother hiding his smile.

Things change after that, but mostly they stay the same. Richie overthinks all of his interactions with Eddie a little more, wondering what it means - if they’re dating, or if they’re soulmates-with-benefits, or if it was all a mistake - but they still bicker the way they always do, and Eddie still pretends not to laugh at Richie’s best jokes and shoves him away when he singsongs his many nicknames.

Overall, it is both more and less stressful somehow.

Every time they're making out, stolen moments in the back of the library, in an empty room of the vice architect residence, in the cinema, like teenagers, rarely ever in their room, with the dog howling at them and the clowns watching, Richie wonders if it's the last time or in how much danger he's putting Eddie just by knowing.

But it's fine!

He's fine.

It is not like they get a lot of chances to, anyway, what with their house being a creepshow. Sometimes, even outside, they are interrupted.

"Fancy seeing you here," Bill tells them, smiling, when they are hanging out by the lake with a picnic and their hell dog tied to a tree nearby so she would stop trying to maim them or eat their bread.

"Bill!" Eddie says, smiling too, tense - Richie wonders if he doesn't want to be seen together before remembering they are supposed to be in love anyway and dismissing the intrusive thought. "What are you doing here, by the lake, today?"

"Oh, Ben was busy with work, and Bev wanted to, uh," Bill hesitates, "have suh-some me-time, it can be c-crowded sometimes with all three of us, so I rode here on my bike. Thought I might get inspired. I haven't written in a while."

Their house is big enough to host a small family and could never be crowded. Even Richie knows this means Bev is in one of her weird moods, where she wants to smoke up on the roof and design dresses that will never be worn and mope, which usually would be accompanied by him smoking next to her and not-talking-about-her-feelings, if he hadn't been avoiding all of the others for a while now. That last one is also why it is a surprise to him to find out Bill stutters more and more these days.

"Is Bev going to be alright?" Richie asks anyway, even as familiar words dance around his head.

Bill shrugs. "Sure," he says, but he doesn't seem convinced either,

and changes the subject quickly. "Can I join you guys, or is this a, uh," he takes in the bottle of red wine, the fresh ripe fruits in a basket, the unopened books, "a duh-d-date?"

Richie looks at Eddie. Eddie looks at Richie. Bill looks between them like a hopeful puppy. Their actual puppy is barking at a duck and doesn't care to look at any of them. Eddie is still looking at Richie.

"Oh, yeah, no, it's totally fine-" Richie finally says.

"Actually, Bill, you know what-" Eddie starts at the same time.

They look at each other again. Each wondering what the other was about to say.

"Nevermind, I meant-" Richie begins, but Eddie cuts him this time.

"Sure, Bill. You can sit down."

"Uh," Bill says. "I mean, I can always-"

"No!" Eddie half-shouts, making the both of them wince. "No," he tries again, calmer and slower. "It's really fine. Come on. The more the merrier, right, Rich?"

"Top ten sentences used before a threesome," Richie contributes.

Bill snorts. "You wish, T-Tozier."

"Uh, yeah. Have you seen everyone in this fucking neighborhood? I swear, everyone looks straight out of an Abercrombie photo shoot. An almost middle-aged, kind of MILF-ish one."

"Richie, none of us is older than thirty-five," Bill points out, already half spread out on their plaid blanket, leaning on his elbows.

"So what? Thirty-five is some seventy-year-old sucker's middle age. Wait- God, we're not even our own middle-ages. That's just *sad*."

Before the awkwardness of yet another reminder of their status settles in, Eddie offers Bill wine - which he accepts gladly - and food - which Richie steals from their open hands. The day is peaceful

enough, sunshine piercing in and out of clouds, just enough that their skin is pleasantly warm but not so much that it becomes uncomfortable. Every so often a soft breeze offers Richie a noseful of Eddie's cologne. It is like the Instagram post of picnics, which is fortunate considering how hard Richie has had to work to convince Eddie to take up the offer. *Something something* about bugs and the diseases they carried before Eddie has realized himself that it did not apply to the good place and shushed Richie repeatedly before he could make a joke about it.

Before Richie is aware he even decided to sleep, he is already taking a nice, warm nap with his head in Eddie's lap, listening to the familiar noise of his chatter with Bill and basking in the familiar sensation of his hair being played with.

When he wakes up, what feels like hours since then but is probably more about a dozen minutes, Bill is close to Eddie, sitting up and gesturing to something in a book in his hand. Richie takes time to figure out the title - *The World as Will and Representation*, the book whose Ethics chapter they were supposed to be reading and that Eddie brought along to pretend they were going to be productive - and then takes more time to watch Bill writing something in the margins, which Eddie never lets Richie do, ever. Of course, when Richie writes inside books, it is usually in the line of penis doodles or pizza slices (what? He gets hungry, alright, it's busy work) or "R + E" in cheesy hearts so that Eddie will get all annoyed and frowning later.

Somehow, something about the scene is familiar, but he can't quite figure out what. He is used to it.

He blames his own dazed state for not connecting the dots straight away.

When he finally does, he shoots up. Doesn't listen to Eddie yelping because his brow hit his chin violently. Stare at the page Bill is holding, not at his bemused expression. Loops curved around the f's and l's and such. Almost cursive. Familiar.

"Your handwriting," Richie says.

Bill frowns, confused. "My what now?"

"Your handwriting," he repeats, heartbeat going from zero to hundred way too fast. "It's the same. I kept wondering- I thought it might be the Architect, or Bev, I even considered Eddie for a while, I didn't want to talk to him about it because I wasn't sure, like I was almost sure but I wasn't *sure*, 99%, fuck, even fucking *Stan*. Especially fucking Stan, actually."

Bill takes a second before his face clears up in understanding, red lips forming a perfect o.

"What the fuck are you on about?" Eddie says behind Richie, pitch of his voice rising.

"You didn't know," Bill says, quietly.

"Is somebody going to explain to me what the fuck is going on?"

"The paper," Richie says, nonsensical, then, stands up. Digs into his pocket, where it always stays. Unfurling it, throws it on Eddie's lap, laughing, just a bit hysterical. "That fucking paper."

"You didn't know," Bill repeats. "I thought you knew."

"What? What the fuck would make you think that? Wait, scratch it- why would you even think I know anything, ever?"

"Well, I don't k-k-k-k-" Bill takes a breath, stands up too, hand pulling at his own hair, now two idiotic grown men standing up in the middle of the woods, while a tiny dog yaps at them, sound shrill and piercing like an alarm, "I don't know. It suh-seemed *obvious*."

"How- what- why would you even *do* that?" Richie waves his hands around like it will help show his hysteria face to the situation. "Dude, I thought we were *friends*!"

"What do you mean- of course we're f-fuh-friends! Wait, is that why you've b-been avoiding us for t-two weeks?"

"*I got a fucking threat*- of course I was avoiding you, you asshole!"

“You thought I was th-th-threatening you?”

*“It’s a piece of paper that just says I know your secret!”*

“How is that- wh-what- I mean,” Bill throws his hands up in the air, scrunches up his face, contorted and annoyed, and then, just when he seems about ready to yell once again, unfurls, quieter all of a sudden, and less stuttering. “Actually, yeah, I get why you would think that. Now that I’m thinking about it.”

Richie, who was winding up to keep fighting for way longer, is caught off guard. He hesitates between going on with his outrage and- “What was *that* all about if it wasn’t a threat, then? Is that your fucked up idea of a love letter, Big Bill? Because I gotta say, even though Bev is a lucky gal-”

“What? Of course not! I would never- Ben and Bev-” Bill stops, sighs, gets back on track with the conversation. “I just wanted to reach out- I just wanted you to see you were not alone. *But*,” he adds upon seeing Richie open his mouth again. “I can *see* now how that would be misinterpreted.”

*“Misinterpreted - Bill, to the risk of repeating myself, it’s an anonymous piece of paper that just says I know your secret.”*

“I thought you knew it was me! We’re friends!

“How the fuck was I supposed to know it was you?”

Bill just gives him a look, finally stopping his pacing around to stop and stare at him. “Richie. The handwriting.”

“The what now?” Richie asks. “You think I’m like, what, a fucking-gay, dead, shitty comedian Sherlock Holmes?”

“Richie,” Bill repeats, not quite patiently, as if his name was going to make Richie smarter somehow. “The paper we all signed to sign up for Mike’s class is strung up along the walls of the city. Richie. We’ve *literally* swapped notes for the class. I thought you *knew*. God, you weren’t even discreet about anything. I heard you talk about it back when the shrimps fell. Remember? Ben was making rounds? God, I don’t even know how *he* didn’t hear you. That was, what, a month



ago?”

For a moment there is only a drawn-out pause hanging between the two of them. Richie needs to process.

“Alright! Can we just assume,” he finally shouts, annoyed, “in all our future plotting, that I’m a moron? PLEASE can we take that into account?”

“Now I will!” Bill shouts back, but then he just give Richie another look, and Richie just mouths his incomprehension back.

All of a sudden they are both laughing so hard they cry.

Only half of it is raw relief, Richie decides. The woods are quiet around them, birds having long since escaped at the sound of their shouting match, the hell dog napping quietly in the shadow of the tree, apparently undisturbed now that they have quieted down though she spent half an hour japing at them in cacophony before that.

“You too?” Richie asks, not pausing to wonder if he is making sense.

Bill is smiling. He understands. “Me too!” he says, sounding way happier than he ought to be.

Then Eddie is getting up and into Richie’s face, looking every shade of pissed off, which doesn’t make sense, because it’s okay, they’re okay, they’re safe, or as much as they can ever be, and Richie wants to tell him so, already has his arms up halfway into what could be a manly hug, but Eddie just frowns deeper and spits out: “Fuck you, Richie,” and storms out, leaving Richie to blink at the empty space, shocked, then run behind him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

kudos and comments are my mango-flavored ice cream

### **Author's Note:**

special shoutout to gabi for being the awesomest

beta in the world and louise who won't read this because she has no taste and didn't watch It but whose thriftshop "the man the legend" t-shirt was blatantly ripped off for the sake of richie's characterization!! because it's ridiculously tacky and she's a sapphic fashion icon.

if you want to share your thoughts on the fic, talk about richie and eddie being chaotic gays or ask me where you can find a "the man the legend" t-shirt yourself you can comment or send me an ask on bisexualstanieluris on tumblr or dodieravenclark on twitter i love making Friends